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SALLY RUTHERFORD

Whether it's hitchhiking from the Linvanti River in Namibia's Caprivi Strip to Cape Town or drifting on a dhow off the coast of Mozambigue. National Geographic Traveller's copy editor is never afraid of a bit of adventure. That said, she's more than happy to dip her toes into the luxe life too, and the more remote the destination, the better. In this issue, she relishes the tropical splendour and rich waters of the Maldives - plus Lux's thoroughly enticing overwater spa (page 20).



PETER MCBRIDE

Pete is an award-winning photographer, writer and visual storyteller whose love of adventure, cultures and the outdoors has taken him throughout the world to over 60 countries. When not on assignment, you can find Peter in the mountains or on the rivers around the Roaring Fork Valley, Colorado. Here he explores Rishikesh, India, seeking to retune his ailing back by embracing ashram life and yoga's core-stabilising, mind-calming routines (page 82).



FRAUKE STEGMANN

Born in Windhoek, Namibia, Frauke is a design consultant - and a huge fan of oldschool printing techniques. She develops design and marketing materials through self-initiated projects. Using nature and craft in its social contexts, she develops artistic ideas that can be applied commercially. View more of her work and musings at www.ineedtimetothinkaboutwildlife.org, and get the inside track to her favourite Windhoek places and spaces on page 12.



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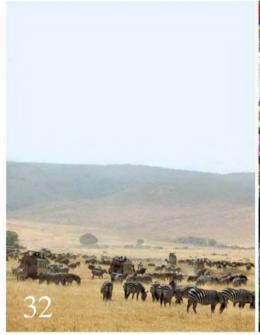
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'Bizarre travel plans are dancing lessons from God'

- KURT VONNEGUT

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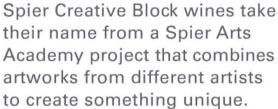
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COVER Lux Maldives, Dhidhoofinolhu Island PHOTOGRAPH Adriaan Louw







www.spier.co.za

travel tactics for a changing world

SMART TRAVELLER



GREEN HOUSE

AIRY, CONSERVATORY-STYLE CAFÉ'S SERVING FRESHLY HARVESTED FARE WHET OUR APPETITE

WORDS KERRYN FISCHER

WE CAN THINK OF NO BETTER PLACE TO EAT than in a garden where veggies and herbs thrive. Our pick of the best greenhouse cafés around the world comes tried and tested. These places offer a tranquil respite from the thriving cities that surround them. Even better, they are often models of a new vision for urban spaces where the priorities are shifting to include sustainable green practices, organic gardening and a fresh, contemporary approach to architecture. While the concept of crisp garden produce being used to create scrumptious fresh daily menus is hardly revolutionary, each café's authentic interpretation of this lifestyle-enhancing trend heralds a brave new world.







PETERSHAM NURSERIES CAFÉ London

This fabled teahouse serves tea, coffee and cake all day, as well as an Italian-inspired menu: think really good roast chicken with a steamed cauliflower salad; frittata and salad; or fresh soup and mozzarella salad. The antique conservatory setting is magical, straight out of the pages of a Beatrix Potter book. Get there early for a table. www.petershamnurseries.com

ROSENDALS CAFÉ Djurgården, Stockholm

The island of Djurgården, a five-minute bike ride from central Stockholm, is a must-do for visitors. More like an open garden, it's great in summer when you can pick your own fruit, cut your own flowers, lunch on organic salads, sandwiches, traditional Swedish cakes and pastries in the gorgeously rustic greenhouse, or picnic under a tree. Stock up on wholegrain breads and jams in the shop to take home. www.rosendalstradgard.se

DE KAS Frankendael Park, Amsterdam

It's thanks to Chef Gert Jan Hageman that this old greenhouse, originally part of Amsterdam's Municipal Nursery, was saved from demolition and is now a restaurant and nursery. The lofty, light-filled interior is simple but sophisticated, with a daily menu inspired by rural Mediterranean cooking that uses produce from the surrounding gardens. You can have a set two-course menu for lunch or three courses for dinner. Highly recommended. www.restaurantdekas.nl



WINDHOEK

Cape-based graphic designer Frauke Stegmann likes to return as often as possible to Windhoek in Namibia. where she was born. Here she shares her favourite spaces and places in this 'beautiful city in the veld'

> 'If you are interested, inquisitive, observant or question things, it doesn't matter where you are or where you come from,' says Frauke Stegmann, the founding creative behind Birds Boutique Café in Cape Town. For those familiar with her exquisite illustrations of birds and animals, it will come as no surprise to learn that Frauke is something of a design powerhouse, with a list of clients (past and present) that include fashion brands such as Miu Miu and Eley Kishimoto, Brazilian furniture designers the Campana Brothers, London's Design Museum and Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker. And while her experimental approach incorporating animation and fashion multimedia may seem a far cry from her childhood in one of the world's largest deserts, she remains unperturbed. 'I think growing up in Namibia away from it all set me on a long road of discovery,' she adds. But there's no doubt that she's been influenced by the harsh, stripped-back natural beauty of the environment, too, as it made her more curious about what lay beyond. 'Spring is a time of incredible beauty in the surrounding veld and mountains of Windhoek. The reason for this is that during winter all wild trees dry out completely and look as if they are dead. But once springtime appears, these "dead" trees start budding with extraordinary wild puff flowers, and then towards October, the branches turn bright green with new leaves. All this happens without a drop of rain falling. It is a remarkable process to witness.'

TRANSNAMIB MUSEUM The very informative Transport Museum is housed at Windhoek Railway Station - I highly recommend taking a walk around the station where you will find excellent examples of German Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) architecture and fittings from the early 1900s. Bahnhof Strasse, Windhoek Central

BLUE FROG RESTAURANT This café - in a beautiful building dating from 1908 built in German abstract Art Nouveau style - serves excellent lunches and has free WiFi. It's right next to the FNCC (Franco Namibian Cultural Centre). Just across the road is the seat of the SADC Tribunal, housed in the Turnhalle building (another survivor of the modern German architectural style of the early 1900s).

www.fncc.org.na

NATIONAL ART GALLERY AND NATIONAL THEATRE

View local art at the gallery and buy exquisite regional crafts at the shop. Renovations are, however, about to start. Next door is the National Theatre, a '70s architectural object of desire. While some original fittings - like the floor at the entrance - have been removed, inside most things are intact. Don't miss the backstage theatre, where performances take place behind the curtains on the massive stage. www.nagn.org.na; www.ntn.org.na **INDEPENDENCE AVENUE ON FOOT** Find unexpected things as you walk down Windhoek's main street one 'end' is just around the corner from the National Gallery. Search out the century-old little pharmacy where the all-knowing pharmacist can help you with most ailments. Stroll down the street to Restaurant Gathemann, which offers fine dining in one of Windhoek's earliest buildings. It's a great to place to sit during the day to catch a view over the main street and watch passersby while lingering over a bottle of champagne or wine.

CAFÉ SCHNEIDER Windhoek's urban landscape has undergone massive changes but one of the few places to remain virtually unchanged is Café Schneider, which opened in 1957. My parents used to go there in the '60s, sit at exactly 'that' table and order superb food. You'll still find some original fittings and a few old classics on the menu: Paradise Cup, Coupe Denmark and Banana Split. Levinson

Arcade, Independence Avenue

OTTO'S GENERAL DEALER Situated in what used to be the Grüner Kranz Hotel, this superb secondhand shop has great finds from Namibia's attics. There is also a little café that will be officially reopened at the beginning of 2013 as an ultimate food shop by my mother and sister Matilde and Heike Stegmann, who owned Birds Boutique Café in Cape Town. www.ottosantiques.com; www.studiomatildeandheike.com

LOVERS' HILL LOOKOUT POINT A flight of steps leads you to a 'secret' platform with incredible views over Windhoek by day; also perfect for sundowner snacks and drinks and for stargazing at night.

Above Love Street

NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDEN The exquisite 12-hectare nature reserve in the heart of the city also serves as a botanical research institute, and the larger part of it is unlandscaped. Go for a walk in the wild bush-garden, do a walkabout with a botanist on the first Saturday of each month or visit the extensive library as well as the nursery and desert house with succulents adapted to Namibia's desert conditions, www.nbri.org.na HOTEL HEINITZBURG Built in 1914, this is the perfect place for champagne sundowners with incredible views over Windhoek and fine dining afterwards at Leo's at the Castle; if you like beef you will find the best sirloin you have ever tasted right here, but even better are the fresh Swakopmund lobsters! www.heinitzburg.com

GREEN MARKET Every Saturday morning you will find the best cup of coffee in Windhoek, biodynamically grown vegetables, cakes and belegte Brötchen (open sandwiches) at the Stephanus Church eco market. 3 Uhland Street, Klein

JOE'S BEERHOUSE Although quite 'lodgy' looking.

Windhoek

this is the place to order the best, coldest drafts of Windhoek Lager and sit around a massive fire. And it has superb food. www.joesbeerhouse.com HABITAT CENTRE AND PENDUKA If I need inspiration and information for sustainable interventions for interiors and urban gardening, I go to the incredible Habitat Centre, designed by eco architect Nina Maritz. And drive a bit further to reach the wonderful Penduka centre in Katutura, where I go to buy handmade craft. Book ahead for fantastic drumming, dancing, jewellery-making or basketbraiding workshops or to stay overnight, eat, cook and be free. www.nnf.org.na; www.penduka.com



REINVENTING THE AFRICAN SAFARI

Old-style opulence meets sustainability, and a new model of travel is born

RALPH BOUSFIELD SAFARI SPECIALIST & CONSERVATIONIST

The son of an adventurer whose idea it was to bring travellers to the Makgadikgadi salt pan of Botswana, Ralph Bousfield grew up in the African bush and went on to study nature conservation in Pretoria. In 1993, he cofounded Uncharted Africa Safari Company, now billed as 'one of the last truly traditional safari operations in Africa'.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR FATHER, JACK

BOUSFIELD. He was a legendary crocodile hunter and adventurer who was killed in an airplane crash in 1992. While our safaris today eschew guns for cameras, they nevertheless continue his vision of making cultural interactions an important part of the experience for visitors.

YOUR FATHER CAME FROM AN ERA THAT SOME AFRICANS AREN'T PROUD OF. HOW HAS YOUR APPROACH TO BUSINESS CHANGED?

Obviously we're products of history, but we've learned so much since my father's day. Most notably the costs of our actions to the environment. We've learned to appreciate the role of wildlife, their movements and migrations. As a company, we try to stay on the cutting edge, to offer every sort of luxury but also a very personal experience involving wildlife, local people and experts.

WHAT LIES IN WAIT FOR VISITORS TO

JACK'S CAMP? The company hosts visitors at various classically styled camps in Botswana's Kalahari Desert, where they can witness migrating wildebeest, watch playful meerkats and listen to the cry of the hyena. Guests visit ancient baobabs and venture out onto the dusty Makgadikgadi salt pan, the remnant of a once great lake.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR USE OF HELICOPTERS ON TOUR? It's the latest means of exploring, getting you where you ordinarily would never go. Accessing these areas actually benefits them, because we bring money and attention to places that would be too marginal for us to operate in by truck. And while some argue about the fuel a helicopter uses, they actually leave a smaller footprint than a big convoy of vehicles would, not to mention not having to build bridges. We've done helicopter trips in the Kalahari, accessing areas with rock art, and we've even been into northern Uganda, viewing various highland species of wildlife.

ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC THAT INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES CAN PERSERVE THEIR ANCIENT CULTURES? That's enormously important, but the preservation takes different forms. Here in

Botswana, everybody has to go to school by law. even the traditional cultures. I think that's good. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES? Some people take a romantic Western perspective and seem to want the locals to live in a traditional way as though they were an exhibit in a museum. That attitude is unsustainable. What does get sustained - in terms of skills and knowledge of a culture - is whatever the world assigns value to. If people look down on someone who lives as a hunter-gatherer, saying, in effect, 'You're close to being an animal,' then the communities will not

SO HOW DO YOU TACKLE THAT? The work we do as safari outfitters gives value to the traditional ways of living - and the traditional knowledge of botany and wildlife, for example. Our work helps preserve the old ways, saying to Bushmen: 'Your knowledge is worth something.'

want to continue that lifestyle.

I was discussing our safaris with some Bushmen, and a few guys said to me: 'We would like to do exactly what you do.' I said: 'What do you think I do?' And they said: 'You use the knowledge that you inherited from your father. People pay you to do what he taught you. We want to do the same thing with what we know.' And they were absolutely right. Rather than just looking into the past, they were looking to the future and finding a way to mutually benefit.

DO YOU RETREAT INTO NATURE TO DESTRESS, TO RECHARGE? Yes. We live in the Kalahari, among big, wide-open spaces. It's a huge environment that puts things into perspective. You feel quite insignificant, not in a negative way but just in how we can sometimes take ourselves too seriously and get caught up in day-to-day irritations. I've been driving since 6am this morning, moving through herds of thousands of Wildebeest, springbok and oryx. Being out in raw nature is like meditating, almost as though you are achieving a different state of consciousness. And if I'm having a hard time, I just go for a walk in the environment. The further you walk, the smaller you become, and the more insignificant your problems. I always come back from these walks thinking: 'Okay, I'm ready to take on the next challenge.'

- Keith Bellows



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Not just tough, smart. Amarok.



Vehicles

ANSWERING OUR LION CRISIS?

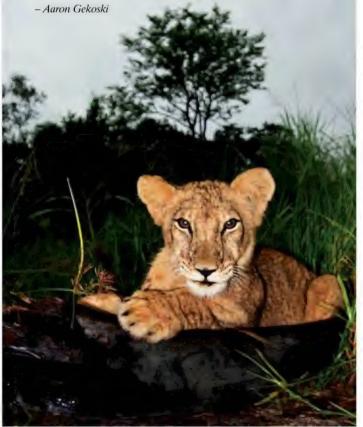
How Africa's pride could become its shame

The lions' status as king of the jungle is in jeopardy. Once found widely throughout Africa, Asia and Europe, they now only exist in sub-Saharan Africa and India's Gir Forest. Populations have declined by an estimated 30 to 50% in the last two decades alone.

Many complex factors are responsible for this demise. First and foremost, lion habitat is being destroyed by human settlement. Due to the diminishing food sources, livestock becomes an easy meal: a lion can destroy a villager's livelihood overnight. As locals strive to protect their assets, rural lion hunts are becoming increasingly common.

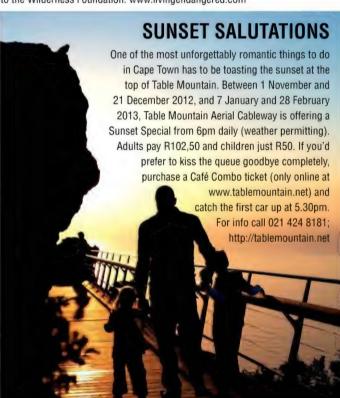
Other problems lie further afield. The predators' bones are being used as an alternative ingredient to tiger bones in traditional Asian medicine. As a consequence of depleting numbers, inbreeding is leading to a reduced genetic diversity, while diseases such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are threatening the world's second-largest living cat.

It may not be all doom and gloom, however. A controversial breeding initiative in Zimbabwe claims to have found a solution to our lion crisis, with a proposed four-stage Rehabilitation and Release into the Wild programme. ALERT's aim is to release the offspring of captive-bred lions into carefully chosen sites around Africa. Critics question whether these lions will cope with the harsh realities of life in the wild. Until stages three and four have been implemented at Antelope Park, the jury remains out.



FRINGE BENEFITS

Did you know that the Table Mountain ghost frog is one of the 100 most endangered species in the world? Neither did we until we came across this exquisite jewellery range inspired by the plight of relatively obscure but critically endangered Western Cape species. Handcrafted by jewellery designer Shelley Robertson, this range forms part of Living Endangered by the Last Word, gorgeous products inspired by smaller, more obscure - but no less important endangered endemic species on the fringe of extinction, such as the golden protea and the geometric tortoise. Five percent of proceeds goes to the Wilderness Foundation. www.livingendangered.com



MOVIES BY STARLIGHT

Enjoy an unforgettable movie night at The Galileo Open Air Cinema at Kirstenbosch Gardens in Cape Town



On Wednesdays from November to April, The Galileo brings you a range of documentaries, foreign films, adventure sports movies and all-time classics. Pack a picnic or treat yourself to wholesome fresh treats - or popcorn and Coke - from local food vendors. Choose from standard (ticket only), warm (ticket plus blanket), comfy (ticket plus back rest) to comfy&warm (ticket plus back rest and blanket), www.thegalileo.co.za LEFT Watch E.T. under the stars on 27 February 2013

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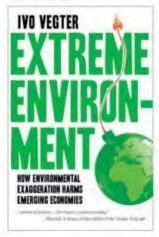
BOOKS

Great reads – from food for thought to the philosophy of food

EXTREME ENVIRONMENT BY IVO VEGTER (Zebra Press)

This book comes as a timely intervention in the great 'fracking' debate - or non-debate if you're counted among those who automatically assume shale-gas drilling in the Karoo is a bad thing. Ivo Vegter deftly picks apart the strident arguments of the antifracking lobby, showing much of their rhetoric to be inaccurate, exaggerated or even false. He argues persuasively that the moralising and spreading of alarm by special interest groups and environmentalists - almost always from a developed-world point of view - is harming the people of the developing world. Put simply, it's a bit rich when you've had your Industrial Revolution and polluted the planet along the way to insist that Third World countries must 'do it clean' at great expense should they wish to grow their economies.

His argument against Green alarmism loses some clout by descending into angry polemic, but the book's core point is powerful: a developing economy such as South Africa's can ill afford to ignore the potential benefits of fracking. - Richard McGuire

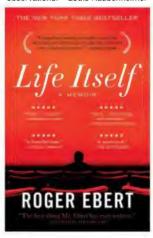


LIFE ITSELF

BY ROGER EBERT (Grand Central Publishing)

Roger Ebert is the only film critic with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and is a former Pulitzer Prize winner. He's a recovered alcoholic. has battled weight issues his entire life, counts some of Hollywood's biggest names as friends, once dated Oprah Winfrey and lost his voice to thyroid cancer. Surgery to combat the illness left his face severely disfigured and as a result he can no longer eat or drink except through a straw. That's quite an existence. Yet Ebert remains difficult to like, probably because he's spent his entire life criticising the artistic pursuits of others.

Given his profound success in a fickle industry, you expect Ebert's writing to come across as slightly pompous and at times prescriptive. and it does. However it's hard to ignore the inherent kindness that seems to permeate so many of his musings. Maybe that's thanks in part to the struggles of his later life. Life Itself is a collection of short tales from Ebert's life, and includes stories about his year as a Rotary exchange student in Cape Town during Apartheid in South Africa, his working-class childhood, his health struggles and meetings with the likes of John Wayne and Martin Scorsese. His skill lies not in his prose, but rather in his succinct anecdotes and observations. - Louis Raubenheimer



READING JACKIE BY WILLIAM KUHN

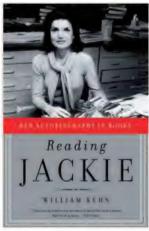
(Anchor Hooks)

I'm always in awe of women who are effortlessly stylish and graceful, but had I known Jackie O personally. I think I might have had a full-on girl crush. With a deep love for the written word, a passion for dance, a penchant for all things French and an affection for foreign men, it turns out Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis was a woman after my own heart!

Having got to know her a bit better through this book, I'm sure she would've been delighted with the way it tells her story: through the work she did as a book editor in the last 20 years of her life, and through the tales told to author William Kuhn by the many writers, friends and colleagues in her life during that time.

As a wanna-be ballerina myself, I particularly enjoyed the stories of Jackie's collaborations with dance legends like Martha Graham, George Balanchine, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Rudolf Nureyev - they reveal as much about the somewhat louche world of professional dance as they do about Jackie's own issues with body confidence, homosexuality and eroticism.

Ironically, the woman who appeared to have it all as a glamorous First Lady and later the wife of a billionaire shipping magnate found true fulfilment only when she was able to pursue the work of her dreams. - Lee-Anne Spurdens



FEAST AT HOME

BY FRANCK DANGEREUX (Quivertree Publications)

Acclaimed chef Franck Dangereux's latest offering is mouthwateringly good to look at (Craig Fraser's photographs are a feast for your eyes) as well as a great read and potentially a kitchen classic.

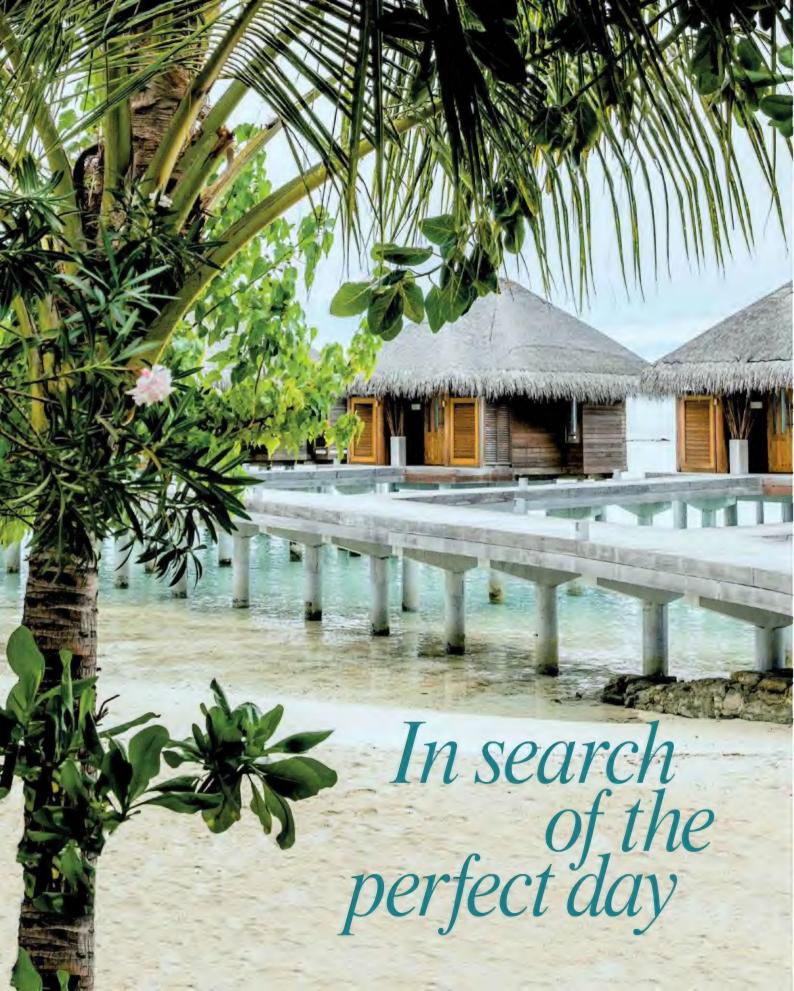
Franck is clearly passionate about every aspect of food, and he shares his enthusiasm, favourite recipes and chef's inside secrets with a down-to-earth generosity that demystifies the art of fine dining. You get the sense that Franck's world would be a better place if all the rest of us were to take up our chef's knives and head off to conquer our kitchens - in a friendly, eco-loving kind of way (sustainable living is another of his passions).

Feast at Home is packed with anecdotes about Franck's childhood in Provence as well as practical advice such as: 'Cooking is about giving - it's a generous deed. Remember this when you cook and if it becomes a chore, stop! Get some takeaways instead' and 'Pour yourself a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc before starting to cook. This will calm your nerves: there is a lot going on at once, but nothing is too difficult in itself.'

Recipes range from simple fare meant to be eaten with your fingers to extravagantly indulgent dishes. More than a cookbook, this is a food philosophy. - Katherine Moir













I first heard of the Maldives when I was a young girl.

My father remarried and whisked his new bride off for an impossibly exotic month-long honeymoon to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. They returned with the deep mahogany tans so fashionable in the early eighties; a huge bag overloaded with sea shells (this was the decade of rampant consumerism, after all, long before prefixes like 'eco' and 'enviro' would saturate our collective consciousness); plus piles of white-trimmed Kodak photographs of sandy tropical beaches, palm trees and unlikely turquoise waters. They regaled anyone who would listen with tales of warm-as-bathwater indigo seas filled with an aquarium of bright tropical fish; cocktails under palm trees; balmy nights under starry skies.

To my farm-girl ears, this brochure-brought-to-life sounded like heaven. (Although I did eavesdrop to hear the riveting detail of an alarming rash that spread to cover my fierce stepmother's bottom by her second day in the Maldives – her horror abated somewhat when she noticed the clouds of mosquitoes that rose into the air every time she raised the lid of the loo.) Despite this minor detail, the Maldives were imprinted on my brain as the most alluring paradise I could imagine.

Fast forward many trips to places as diverse as Oregon and Sumatra, and I hadn't yet made it to the Maldives, even though they had lost none of their appeal in the intervening years. After a long, grey and cold Cape Town winter, my requirements for tropical perfection remained almost unchanged: very warm water; talcum-powder beach sand; unremitting sunshine; blue skies; no wind ... ever; snorkelling; peace and privacy; and definitely a hammock! The icing on the cake would be to swim with a whale shark. It was time to dive into the Maldives.

Islands in the sun

The Maldives archipelago consists of 1 190 tiny islands scattered across the Indian Ocean. Only 185 are inhabited, while the others are used largely for tourism – a mainstay of the economy along with fishing. The atolls are composed of live coral reefs and sand bars perched on top

of a 960km-long underwater ridge. With an average ground level of just 1,5m above sea level, the Maldives is by far the lowest country on earth. Global warming and rising sea levels pose a very real threat to this fragile ecosystem.

Our flight delivered us to Malé, the Maldives capital city, bang on time at 9.35 at night. It was dark outside, but the air was humid, steamy and full of promise. Here, stated our itinerary, we were to board a seaplane for the 30-minute hop to Dhidhoofinolhu in the South Ari Atoll. 'If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is', is a mantra I probably should have been intoning throughout my Emirates flight from South Africa, but I was seduced by the lie-flat beds and Bollinger on tap and saw no reason for pessimism. So it was with utter dismay that we discovered the seaplane never flies after dark – we had to take a half-hour internal flight to Maamigili Airport and then a 10-minute speedboat shuttle. We resigned ourselves to a short hold-up, but a four-hour delay while we waited for another three flights carrying Lux-bound guests meant it was after 3am when we finally docked in Paradise.

And Paradise it is: even at that hour of night we could see right through the inky blue water to the rippled white sand on the seafloor below the wooden dock. A large manta ray flapped lazily past, and silver fish glinted in the moonlight. By the time I arrived in my airy beachfront villa, on the sunset side of the island, all had been forgiven: my tropical-island life had begun.

Plenty of fish in the sea

I woke early to the rhythmic swish of three traditionally clad island women lovingly sweeping the beach sand around my villa into pleasing swirls, tending the island where generations of local children had come to play and swim and celebrate life. Maldivians embrace tourism – a mainstay of the economy along with fishing – and these women from a neighbouring island village return day after day to maintain





Dhidhoofinolhu's simple glory. Breakfast at the beachfront Island Kitchen was a sumptuous spread of everything from juicy tropical fruit to crispy bacon and eggs, fragrant croissants and pastries to miso soup and tamagovaki (rolled omelette). This restaurant – a thatch-roofed, open-walled affair set right on the beach – is one of seven in the resort. As I pushed my feet into the warm sand under our table and sipped on my second delicious cup of Lux's own island-roasted freshly ground coffee, I could feel that the spring was back in my sleep-deprived step.

First thing on my agenda was a visit to Lux's world-class PADI dive centre to be fitted with mask, snorkel and fins for today's highlight: a whale-shark expedition with marine biologist Charlotte Hawley, Charlie heads up Lux's Marine Biology Centre, dedicated to the conservation of whale sharks as well as all marine life in the South Ari Atoll. This area is one of the few in the world where you can see whale sharks year round, although - as with any game viewing - nothing is guaranteed.

We boarded a *dhoni* and headed up to the viewing deck above, slowly motoring along the outer reef of the island, all of us focused on the big blue sea, hoping for the first glimpse of these gentle giants. Despite the whale shark being the largest fish on the planet, very little is known about them. We know they swim the oceans, covering vast distances, eating only plankton, tiny fish and squid, but questions like how long they live or where they reproduce still remain unanswered.

Sadly for me, exactly what it feels like to swim alongside one of these colossal creatures is an experience that will have to remain on my bucket list – the shy giants of the sea proved elusive. Adequate compensation was the awesome snorkelling served up next. The water was warm and perfectly clear, the reef teeming with marine life: armed with a camera, Charlie free-dived an impressive 12 metres down to record three green turtles trawling along the coral below. A juvenile blacktip reef shark sliced peacefully through the water above the turtles, rainbow schools of parrotfish, angelfish, Moorish idols, clownfish ... you name it ... darted past. This is the reason to come to the Maldives - to hang weightlessly in the warm seawater, your ears filled with the clicks and bubbles of reef life, your eyes absorbing this scene that is so rich, colourful and alive.

Treading lightly

Back on shore, we headed to lunch at the Veli Pool Bar & Restaurant. The endless rim-flow pool – one of two at Lux – looked both glamorous and inviting, but we'd worked up an appetite and felt we'd earned our delicious lunch. The afternoon was spent exploring the delights of the island. Lux's light-hearted and fresh approach makes resort life fun and unexpected. Explore the 1,8km-long, 500-metre-wide island by foot or just hop on one of Lux's yellow bicycles and pedal along the palmshaded paths that wind through lush vegetation. Chill out in the shade of the herb garden or make like Tarzan in the jungle-gym area, where palm-top rope swings seem to attract as many adults as kids.

Living proof that Lux is, in fact, as contemporary as the website claims can be found in the pop-up stands that surprise you each day. Today a shady spot overlooking a beach has a palm-fringed table with fresh coconut and a sign telling you to help yourself. Tomorrow, stroll a bit further and find ice buckets filled with bottles of freshly squeezed juice to quench your thirst. Keep your eyes open for the extremely well-hidden 'messages in a bottle' that are tucked away each day: inside are prizes that vary from ice creams from Ici, Lux's homemade ice-cream stand, to a massage at the sensational spa or perhaps even a banana-boat ride. There is something for the entire family here: I saw an impossibly elegant mother and her teenage son, both clad in impeccable whites, head to the court for a spot of tennis. The dive centre is the place to go if you fancy a bit of sailing, kitesurfing, waterskiing or a jet-ski ride. I took a kayak for a leisurely paddle, enjoying the manta rays that flapped along the shallow seafloor.

Just before sunset, we joined the staff at the dock on the east end of the island to feed the manta rays, and then strolled to the west end to feed the sharks half an hour later. The day ended with cocktails at the stylish East Bar, suspended over the water and as tranquil as it is hip.

Fifty shades of grey

As anyone who has spent much time in the tropics will tell you, the travel brochures can be misleading: yes, the sky can be ridiculously blue and the sea warm, but the word 'monsoon' means rain, and lots of it as I was to discover. I awoke the next morning to every hue of grey you can imagine: the clouds ranged from purplish grey to dove grey to just plain donkey grey; the ocean was hidden behind a gauze of lavender grey mist, which lifted to show a sea that was now a turquoise grey. Water dripped off the edge of my palm-fringed villa, and when I took to my hammock under the coconut palm, it was to shelter from the rain, not the sun. Luckily, temperatures didn't drop below 27°C, the sea was still warm and swimming in the lagoon around the island still utterly relaxing.

And what better excuse would I find to indulge my inner diva and head to the spa? The word 'zen' could have been invented for this tranquil space with its Balinese-style architecture, his and hers swimming pools and rest areas, and expansive Lux Me treatment menu. I chose a Balinese massage and was led to an overwater villa where the massage table stood over a glass floor with a bird's-eye view of tropical fish swimming in the crystal-clear sea. The expert massage was honestly the best I've ever had, and the spa experience as a whole was sublime.

Perfectly flawed

I've come to realise that it is precisely the unexpected that makes the difference between an itinerary and an authentic travel experience. Had our arrival been by seaplane, I would not have known that in the dark of a Maldives night the sea glows indigo. Had I swum with the whale sharks, I would never have snorkelled with turtles and known that in the tourist mecca of the Maldives there are resorts with marine biology centres that honestly work towards conserving the watery environment and everything within it. Had the sun shone strong and the sky stayed blue, I would never have given myself over to the hedonistic pleasure of the spa and stayed still long enough to absorb every aspect of my Maldives experience. Now I know for certain that the perfect day always holds a large dose of the unknown. It is exactly these unplanned moments that provide you with a holiday you will always remember. PS There wasn't even ONE mosquito in my Maldives!

GETTING THERE Emirates Holidays is offering a special 'stay for four nights, pay for three' package to Lux Maldives from R23 175 per person sharing. It includes four nights' accommodation in a Beach Pavilion, economy-class Emirates return flights from Joburg to the Maldives via Dubai, breakfast, airport/resort/airport transfers by sea plane, room tax and service charges (excludes airport departure tax). Valid until 7 February 2013. Contact Emirates Holidays 0861 040 503, www.emiratesholidays.com





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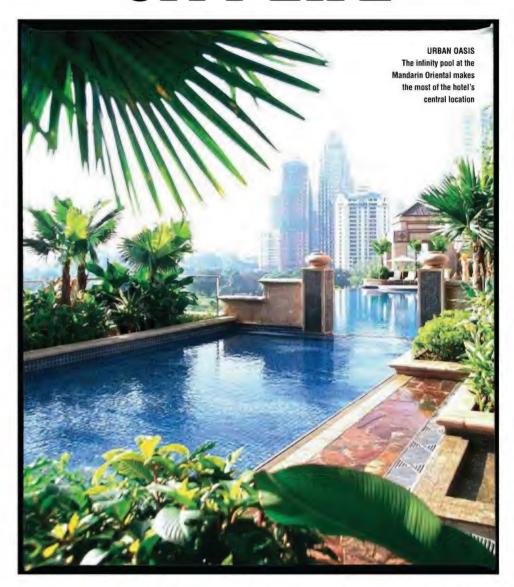
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CITY LIFE



MALAYSIA'S HIGH-OCTANE MIX

KUALA LUMPUR LOVES ITS SKYSCRAPERS, BUT CULTURAL FUSION IS WHAT REALLY MAKES THE CITY SOAR

WORDS LORIEN HOLLAND

HOT AND HUMID KUALA LUMPUR SHOT OUT OF OBSCURITY some 160 years ago with the discovery of exceedingly rich alluvial tin deposits, and it quickly eclipsed older coastal outposts like Penang and Malacca to become the capital city of Malaysia. In the rush, tin prospectors from China, rubber plantation workers from India and British colonial administrators all rubbed shoulders with the local Muslim populations - creating a heady mix of cultures, religions and identities. After decades of breakneck urban transformation, KL, as it is fondly known, has rediscovered its magic night breeze and is sprouting über-cool bars on the rooftops of its skyscrapers. At dizzying heights and with sparkling views over the new urban jungle, these popular night spots set the rhythm for Kuala Lumpur's new groove.

WHAT TO DO

Start up high for a nighttime overview of the city and skyscrapers - a wild mixture of architectural styles and influence - at the rooftop Sky Bar of the Traders Hotel or the nearby G Tower. In full view, just on the other side of the meticulously landscaped KLCC park, loom the iconic Petronas Twin Towers. These elegant siblings, with their glittering steel structures, geometric patterns inspired by Islamic art and glass sky bridge linking them some 40 floors up, were the tallest buildings in the world until 2003.

The next morning, head for the towers themselves. Whizz all the way up to the observation deck on the 86th floor. On a clear day, check out the mass of lakes to the south of the city, which are flooded opencast tin mines, and count the number of rooftop swimming pools in the city centre.

For Malaysia's more traditional side, take a taxi to the Craft Complex on Jalan Conlay, where you can try your hand at batik painting inside a traditionally carved wooden pavilion. Other pavilions house Malaysian painters and potters at work and woven ikat textiles and wood carvings for sale. Just along the street, Badan Warisan Malaysia, a communitybased preservation organisation, sells one of the city's widest and most eclectic selections of artefacts and books on Malaysian heritage, in a whitewashed colonial bungalow with steeply pitched roofs. On the grounds, a garden of native herbs and a Malay village chieftain's restored wooden house on stilts provide an urban oasis.

The limestone Batu Caves, less than half an hour north of the city, have become one of the largest shrines outside India to Lord Murugan, a Hindu deity venerated largely by the Tamils. The imposing 42-metre-high gold statue of Lord Murugan is the world's largest, and the 272 steps leading up to the cathedral cave and its shrines must be among the world's steepest.

To understand the origins of this multicultural city, go to the revamped National Museum for the insightful guided tour in English at 10am on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Key exhibits include the 11 000-year-old remains of Perak Man and Portuguese firearms from their conquest of Malacca in 1511. The nearby

Islamic Arts Museum displays an extensive selection of kris - daggers with undulating edges - and often hosts top-shelf exhibitions.

WHERE TO EAT

The mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian populations in Kuala Lumpur makes for genuine fusion and a wide range of curries, dim sum and satay. European, Japanese, Korean and Arabic foods that reflect the origins of many of the city's residents and tourists add even more to the pot.

For classy, modern French fare with a Malaysian twist (such as foie gras satay), head to glamorous Frangipani, the grand dame of the city's most happening bar street, Changkat Bukit Bintang.

For street food, head to Jalan Alor, a lively road lined with cheap and cheerful Chinese restaurants. At night, tables pack the street and service is fast and furious. Try the chicken fish, a local river fish that tastes, yes, like chicken. Most of the restaurants have similar fare, but Meng Kee, about halfway down the street, is a reliable pick.

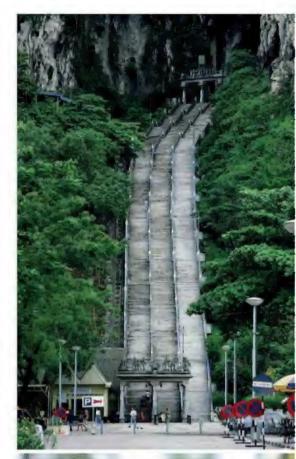
The Carcosa Seri Negara in the Lake Gardens is famed for its afternoon tea. Formerly the mansion of the British Resident in Malaya, this upscale hotel serves the civilised repast in the drawing room or on a wide veranda dotted with wicker chairs. Choose from English cucumber sandwiches and Malaysian curry puffs.

WHERE TO STAY

The Mandarin Oriental offers a great location beside the Petronas Towers and an infinity pool with views over the KLCC park and the city's skyline. Staff serve frozen grapes poolside to keep guests cool. From R1 608; www, mandarinoriental.com

For a taste of KL's growing confidence in modern tropical-home design, head to Sekeping Tenggiri Homestay (in suburban but trendy Bangsar, where a wealth of dining options ranges from Indian bread and dhal breakfasts to late-night coffee joints. From R568; www.tenggiri.com

Hotel Sri Petaling in Chinatown is good for business travellers without the executivelevel budget. Check out the Jalan Petaling street market on Tuesdays. From R410; www. hotelsripetaling.com.my/reservations.html











A Place for Pedestrians YES, YOU CAN GO FOR A WALK IN **KUALA LUMPUR. HERE'S WHERE**

Modern Kuala Lumpur is designed for cars, not pedestrians. Like Los Angeles, there are many freeways and few sidewalks. However, the old parts of the city date back to before the automobile. Here, walking gives a glimpse of the tin rush-era town.

1. St Mary's Cathedral

This quaint Victorian Gothic building may look like a village church from rural England, but it was a key symbol of British colonial power over Kuala Lumpur. Inside is a memorial plaque to Sir Henry Gurney, High Commissioner to the Federation of Malaya, who was assassinated by Communist insurgents Batu Caves. in 1951.

2. Masjid Jamek

This romantic, Mughal-style mosque was designed by the resident British colonial architect in 1907 on a spur of land at the confluence of the city's two rivers. Tin prospectors landed here

when founding the city in 1857, and the mosque is at KL's historic centre.

3. Peter Hoe Beyond

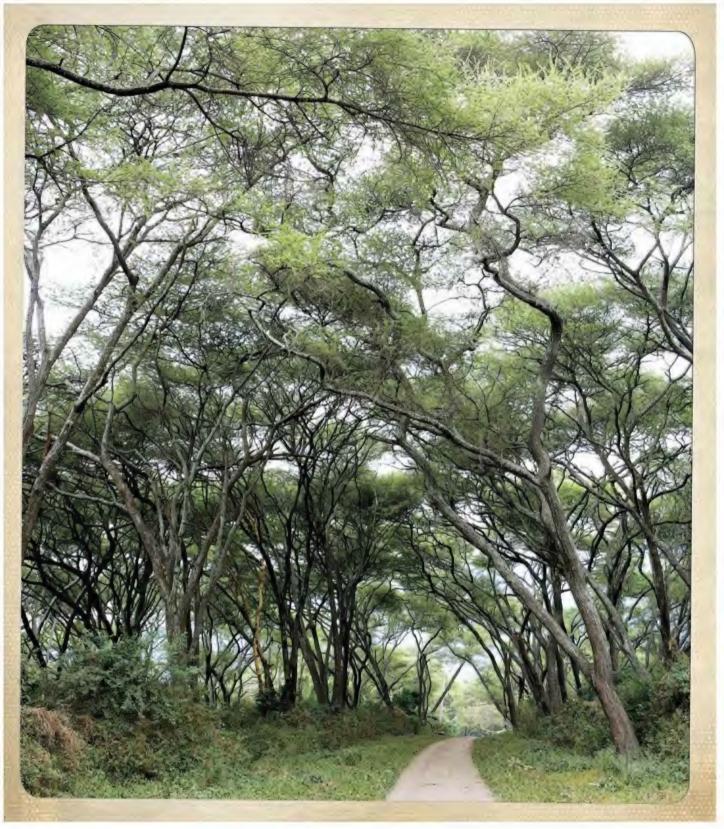
This serene homewares store just off the chaos of Petaling Street market sells tableware, furniture, jewellery and clothing from around Southeast Asia. It doubles as a café serving a good quiche and coffee.

4. Sri Maha Mariamman **Temple**

An army of South Indian artisans sculpted the depictions of Hindu gods on the pyramid-shaped gate tower, which stands an impressive 22 metres tall. Inside, a large silver chariot comes out of its vault every January to carry a sacred statue during a huge procession to the

5. Central Market

This art deco building once served as the city's main food market. Saved from demolition in the late 1970s, it has bloomed into a cultural hub, with kite makers, batik sellers and fortune-tellers.



Tanzanian Bush Breaks

With one of the largest wild animal populations on the planet, Tanzania has long been the ultimate safari destination. But a bush break need not mean a traditional safari experience or luxe lodgings for those with an unlimited budget. If you're in search of a different or more adventurous getaway, our choice of breaks could have you trekking the rim of the Ngorongoro Crater, camping and self-driving in the remote Ruaha wilderness, sleeping Tarzan-style in the mahogany forests of Lake Manyara or indulging in a modern mobile-safari experience in the Serengeti. Whatever your choice, you won't be disappointed

















Singita Explore Mobile Tented Camp and Equestrian Safari

THIS IS EXACTLY WHY TANZANIA HAS EARNED IT'S REPUTATION FOR ADRENALINE-PUMPING GAME VIEWING AND A TOP-NOTCH BUSH EXPERIENCE

o there I was in the game vehicle, swatting away kamikaze tsetse flies with my cashmere scarf knotted into a nunchaku-type weapon. I had taken an immediate dislike to these tenacious bloodsuckers, mostly because their bites were sore but also because they were clever to boot, having perfected the art of an ambush from the rear as they rode in the tail wind of the vehicle! But not even they could detract from the awe I felt at finally being in the Serengeti for the first time. It had been a long time coming, with numerous trips planned but none coming to fruition. Somehow fate had always intervened with real life-and-death situations that conspired to keep me away.

First it was the death of my father, then the discovery of a longed-for pregnancy and finally a freak flash flood that washed away the camp I was meant to visit. And while I'd always felt that no self-respecting travel journalist could write with any authority on the bush if they hadn't been to the Screngeti (or Singita for that matter), I was beginning to see it as some kind of divine intervention against an even greater peril. So when the fourth trip finally came off and I found myself at Singita Grumeti, I was grateful for the privilege and humbled by the beauty of the place.

I was there to test drive the new Singita Explore Mobile Tented Camp, an exclusive-use safari experience that delivers you into the middle of nowhere in style, enabling private and immediate interaction with some of the concession's most remote wilderness sites. So whether you're there to see the migration or simply commune with nature, you're guaranteed a ringside seat complete with ice-cold G&T, memorable campfire moments, delicious food, impeccable service and an overwhelming luxury of space. Inspired by the classic Land Rover car and designed by Cécile & Boyd's, the tents are roomy, elegant

affairs in a crisp sequence of khaki, chrome and leather. Calvin Klein would be right at home. Kitted out with every convenience from handsfree head torches to complimentary postcards on which to send smug greetings back home, it's fuss-free camping at its very best. And any discomfort I might have had with the flies and heat vanished at the sight of my comfy double bed, a proper bucket shower and a flushing loo.

Over the next few days I lunched at the stately Singita Sasakwa Lodge, the flagship homestead with its views over the plains, and Singita Sabora, a permanent tented camp. Both have pools, a necessary diversion in the extreme midday heat. I also spent a night at Faru Faru, Grumeti's seriously inspiring lodge comprising a series of low-slung, glass boxes that have been gently placed into the bush. Another option is a mobile equestrian safari that can be tailor made for anything from two to eight nights, riding between Sasakwa, Faru Faru and Explore.

Mornings and afternoons were devoted to exploring the open veld and revelling in the space, as the concession takes only 80 guests and there is a two-car quota per sighting. And the sightings were incredible. I'd never seen so many animals out on a vast open plain together. As I scanned the horizon from left to right, I saw herds of zebra and oryx, a comical family of mongoose, hyenas snoozing in the tall grass, cheetahs resting under a small thorny tree and warthogs noisily making their way to their burrow. Late one afternoon, I saw the magnificence of my first leopard kill and unwittingly came within inches of a huge male lion lying in a hollow tree trunk right next to our vehicle. It's a landscape that harks back to a time when man had to be protected from the 'beasts' and not vice versa, as it is today.

Singita Explore From R8 517 per person per night in low season on an exclusive-use basis including all meals, drinks, game drives and surface transfers from Sasakwa airstrip. Contact 021 683 3424, www.singita.com

BEAUTIFUL BEASTS
THIS PAGE THE Singila Grumeti Reserve forms part of the Serengell Mara ecosystem opposite, clockwise inou for Lest Singila Grumeti Reserves Equestrian Centre; Sasakwa Lodge is one of just three Singila lodges in this 350 000 acre private concession; laid-back contemporary style at Singila Farur Faru Lodge; daily safari outrides take you into Singila Grumeti's wild beart; gracious living rules at Singila Explore Mobile Tented Camp; true luxury means no walls between you and the Serengeli's expansive wilderness

Crater Highlands Walk

PEEL OFF THE TOURIST LAYERS WITH AN UNPRETENTIOUS HIKE THROUGH REMOTE MAASAI TERRITORY THAT DELIVERS AN INSIGHT INTO VILLAGE CULTURE AND A LIFE EXPERIENCE TO SAVOUR

Where does it start? A few hours' drive from Ngorongoro Crater Rim. Why go? It's off the beaten track: some of it is not accessible by road and you are able to get close to nature and get an authentic taste of local Maasai culture as you walk through their villages.

How fit do you have to be? Quite fit, although it's relatively easy to do. We had our two sons, both under seven, and they handled it well. If you opt to do a midnight summit of the once-active volcano Ol Donyo Lengai (the Maasai Mountain of God) on the fourth night, it is more challenging and obviously not suitable for kids.

How did you get there? We flew to Arusha, then drove to Ngorongoro Crater, where we spent the night at Ngorongoro Wildlife Lodge.

How long was it? We limited ourselves to two nights for the trek because of the kids, but you can do as many as seven days or longer. We camped at Lake Natron after the first day's hike. This soda-alkaline lake is dramatically beautiful and an important nesting site for the lesser flamingo. We spent the next night in a fever-tree forest looking out onto Ol Donyo, and our last night was in the Rift Valley. We timed our route so that our fourth day coincided with a Maasai Village's market day.

What was special about it? You won't see another tourist, just Maasai villages and young boys tending goats while teenagers tend to the cattle. It's a rare glimpse of untouched rural life.

How did you organise this from South Africa? We organised the hike through Tropical Trails, who supplied a driver, a Maasai guide and a cook who set up camp each evening. It's by no means luxury camping (you sleep on the floor in sleeping bags), but the luxury lies in that you don't see anyone else, which makes it very special.

Is it suitable for kids? Definitely. Our boys were aged four and six; it was a great way to spend quality time with them in an environment that is far removed from the usual holiday fare of resorts and buffets.

Would you do it again? Yes. In fact we'd done it before and my husband has done it again since our trip. I would recommend that kids be at least eight years old, as they need to walk for at least four hours a day.

What made this kind of experience different from the safari lodge circuit? There is no sitting in game vehicles looking at wild animals. You're right in the middle of a remote Maasai experience, and that's something you can't experience anywhere else in the world.





'It's not a pretty place in the usual sense of that twinkling word. The elemental and powerful landscape, ranging around the Rift Valley, is one of the Earth's monuments to vulcanism, showing as great plains, steep escarpments and deep lakes' - PAUL THEROUX

Would you do anything differently next time around? No, it was perfect. We did an abridged version because the kids were that much younger. Was it rough or luxe? Roughing it, but then again you don't do your own cooking, so it's a level up from camping solo.

What should you pack? Hiking clothes that can accommodate fluctuating temperatures – it's warm in the day and chilly at night.

Describe a typical day? Every day is different and it depends on where you're travelling from. For example, on our first day we left the hotel at the Ngorongoro Crater early to drive the two hours to the start of the trek. We walked for two hours with our Maasai guide through open terrain and a few small Maasai villages before lunch and played an impromptu soccer game at a school with the most incredible views (not a road or building in sight). Then it was another two hours of walking before we set up camp, and later took a short sunset stroll. Back at camp, we had drinks, played cards, ate dinner and were in bed early.

What was the food like? Pretty basic, but good, and you don't go hungry. Typical meals were cornflakes and eggs for breakfast, fruit with rolls for lunch and spaghetti Bolognese for dinner.

High point? Our boys playing soccer with local children in the middle of absolutely nowhere, to the sounds of cattle bells in the distance.

Low point? It's a bit of a mission to get there, which is fine if you get into the swing of things - you know, the journey is the destination, and all that.

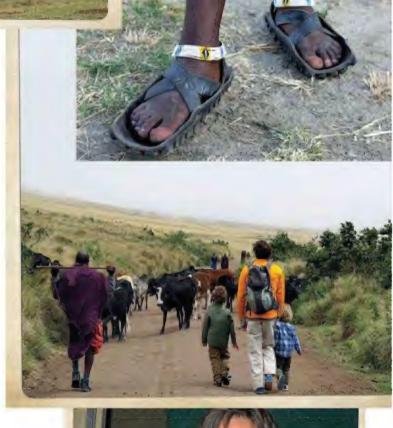
Cost? From R6 010 per adult and R4 093 per child aged 5 to 15 for a four-day trek; http://tropicaltrails.com

- Georgia Black

HAPPY CAMPERS

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT An impromptu game of soccer in a Maasai village was a family highlight; Ngorongoro is a multiple-land-use conservation area, with wildlife coexisting with semi-nomadic Maasai pastoralists practising traditional livestock grazing; following the herd; Leo and his father Justin Letschert

OPPOSITE The dried salt on the edge of Lake Magadi, on the floor of Ngorongoro Crater, looks like a gentle eruption kicked up by a breeze





&Beyond Ngorongoro Crater Lodge with its thick mist forest, flamingo-tinted, salt-crusted pan and diverse african

WILDLIFE. NGORONGORO CRATER HAS A UNIOUE AND HAUNTING BEAUTY

Where is it? Right on the tip of the rim overlooking the crater.

Why go? After witnessing the stirrings prior to migration in the Serengeti, I was touched by the beauty of Tanzania and wanted more. As a World Heritage Site, Ngorongoro Crater with its thick mist forests that are home to a dense variety of game was next on my list. The park is open from 6am to 6pm, but guests of &Beyond stay overnight.

How do you get there? Fly from Joburg to Nairobi in Kenya. The next morning, you take two short hops in 'flying taxis' via Kili airport to Manyara airstrip. Then it's under an hour's drive through the thick mist forest to reach the edge of heaven: a clearing 2 400km above sea level; below is what you've come to see, the gorgeous, flamingo-filled crater.

Is it suitable for kids? It is better for older children and teenagers.

How is it different from the usual safari-lodge circuit? This is the quintessential safari circuit and people flock here from July to September, but the terrain and climate are different to the usual suspects.

What's special about it? It's extraordinarily beautiful - reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands. In the morning, you're surrounded by mist. The lodge plays up to that: after a full day's drive in the crater you'll return to find a hot bath drawn for you, a roaring fire in your bedroom and a trusty pair of Wellingtons to trade for your dusty trainers.

Rough or luxe? Luxe, but not as indulgent as a private reserve.

What should you pack? Warm items for the chilly high-altitude evenings and layers of light clothes so you can strip down at midday in the crater. Describe a typical day? After an early, misty breakfast, we headed off to explore the crater to the haunting sound of gently knocking Maasai cattle bells, the ngorongoro that have lent the crater its name. The whole morning was filled with game viewing in the crater, then we lunched with other explorers at a designated spot where you need to keep a sharp eye out for the yellow-billed black kites that dive bomb your lunch. We slowly made our way back to the lodge past more sightings, trying to get as close to the flamingos as possible. Back at the lodge, the askari escorting me to my room gently stopped me as a herd of buffalo blocked my path and kept me a little longer from the steaming tub I knew awaited me. Then it was a delicious lodge dinner and off to bed feeling satisfied. Lala salama (good night).

Any special sightings? Flamingos, Kori bustards, kites. The Maasai with their cattle. Thompsons gazelle. Hyena (my favourite). Lion. moving from mist forest to gold Serengeti sun in a blink of an eye.



Self-Drive Safari in the Ruaha National Park

A SIMPLE SAFARI OPENS A FATHER'S EYES TO THE TRUE NATURE OF LIONS - AND TO THE MERCURIAL MOMENTS THAT MARK A TEENAGE DAUGHTER'S COMING OF AGE

he lions appear one by one, like ghosts. They are the exact colour of the tall, dry grass. Before we know it, 14 muscled, yellow-eyed great cats have encircled us. They step forward individually, crouch, then move again, their huge paws padding silently in the red dirt. Stealthy as only cats can be, they slip closer and closer. We are not the prey; the pride is stalking a herd of African buffalo.

My 15-year-old daughter, Teal, and I are camping in Ruaha National Park, about 22 000 square kilometres of reserve. We have rented a banda in Msembe Camp. We cook for ourselves, drive our own vehicle and don't need a guide because animals are everywhere. We'd been driving in our Land Rover along a dirt track when a lion wandered in front of us. It was just past dawn; the sky was violet, the fat baobab trees still black. We shut off the engine, crawled onto the top of the Land Rover, and watched the rising sun bronze the arid bush. Within an hour, we were surrounded by the hunting party.

Far off the tourist track, Ruaha National Park lies in central Tanzania, bound by the Mzombe River to the north and the Great Ruaha River to the south. It's Tanzania's largest national park. Its location in the ecological transition zone between southern and eastern Africa means an abundance of species, including over 400 species of birds and eight of antelopes. These sustain predators, from lions to leopards, cheetahs, jackals, hyenas and the rare, endangered African dog.

For now the lions seem focused on the buffalo nearby. Nonetheless, when a large male glances our way, my daughter dives off the roof into the cab. 'Dad, get in here,' she whispers through the cracked window. The sarcasm that normally laces what she says is suddenly gone.

The lions are assiduously stalking breakfast and yet their tactics appear indolent. A few even nap in the crouching position. But the African buffalo have hustled their newborns and yearlings into a group and posted sentries – enormous black beasts with curled horns – along the outer rim. The sentries appear wary but unafraid as they face down the cats: when a lion charges, a sentry lowers its head, thrashing its lethal horns, stomping its hooves - and the lion turns tail.

'Dad, please. They could get you,' Teal says. I haven't heard that tone of voice since she was 12, when we did almost everything together: rock climbing, skiing, camping. Then she turned 13 and told me those things were my things, not hers; she hadn't liked them in the first place.

I brought Teal with me because I wanted her to see the people I mention when I point out how good her life is. We went to schools where barefoot children walk eight kilometres each way to study in windowless rooms. We stopped in a school where the girls' dorm burned down when two teens studied by candlelight. Twelve girls her age were burned alive. We visited a village where kids herd goats all day, usher them into a thorn-bush kraal at night and listen for hyenas in their sleep. Teal hasn't complained once.

The young lions taunt the buffalo. Perhaps it's evolutionary protocol. A young lion will charge a massive African buffalo, which then charges back, scaring the lion away. A lone lion can do nothing to an adult



African buffalo. Could it be peer pressure that makes adolescents take turns risking their lives? I watch a charging young male caught by a buffalo hoof propelled into the air, like a bucked-off cowboy.

Teal, silent, appears riveted by this mortal game. Then three males hanging around the Land Rover move to sit in the shade of an acacia tree. 'Dad, please!' Teal sounds genuinely scared. I lean off the roof of the Landie and whisper, 'It's okay, honey, really. They're not after me.'

'You don't know that! You think you know everything.'

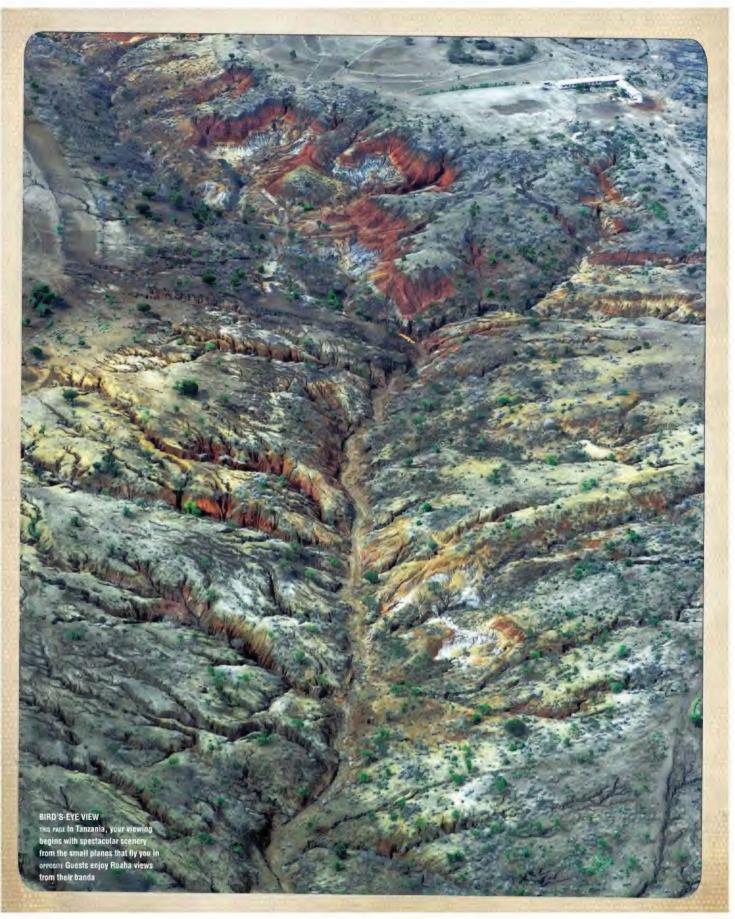
The African buffalo are crowding toward a mud hole. The sun is heating up, the black rocks in the distance shimmer. The lions appear bored; they're dropping away from the herd. Then, suddenly, a large lioness streaks across the veld. A calf has ended up on the edge of the herd. The lioness races through the tall grass. But a bull recognises what is happening and charges, cutting off the lioness at the last moment.

'I got it on video!' Teal yells up to me, visibly excited.

That is the last act, the morning's coda. We have been watching the play for three hours. The big cats abandon the chase, vanishing into the tall grass as effortlessly as they appeared. The buffalo crowd in at the mud hole. I crawl back into the cab and we drive away. Teal is bubbling over with enthusiasm, retelling the adventure in Technicolor, me pitching in details.

The most valuable advice I ever got was from a young mother. She told me to relax; teenage girls are programmed to ignore their fathers. 'Remember that for hundreds of thousands of years, 15-year-old girls have procreated. It's natural – healthy – that she's pushing you away.' - Mark Jenkins

Ruaha National Park Daily conservation fees R175 for adults and R44 for children aged 5 to 16: vehicle permit from R350 (more for vehicles over two tons). Self-catering Msembe banda from R175 per person per night. www.tanzaniaparks.com



&Beyond Lake Manyara Tree Lodge

PUT THIS RESERVE'S FAMOUS TREE-CLIMBING LIONS TO THE TEST BY SLEEPING HIGH IN A LUXURIOUS TREE HOUSE. IN THE THICK OF BUSH SO ALIVE THAT IT WILL MAKE YOUR STOMACH KNOT

Where is it? Lake Manyara National Park hugs the side of the Great Rift Valley escarpment and is a 15-minute drive from Manyara airstrip or an hour's drive from the gate of Ngorongoro National Reserve.

Why go? It's the only lodge within Lake Manyara National Park, making your bush experience intimate and exclusive. You'll love the tree-climbing lions, abundant birdlife, intimacy of a bush experience in a remote tree house in the mahogany forest ... and the frozen G&Ts.

Is it suitable for kids? It's more suitable for couples as it's romantic and nurturing, or for families with older children.

How is it different from the usual safari-lodge circuit? This small wildlife reserve is home to a wide variety of birdlife and vegetation. Lake Manyara Tree Lodge consists of just 10 luxurious suites nestled high up in the trees; you feel vulnerable and very much part of your surroundings. Nocturnal bush life keeps you awake as bush babies shout and leap from branch to branch, hyenas whoop continuously, and snapping and crunching sounds set your city imagination on overdrive – could that be a herd of elephant about to crash through your door?

How do you get to the lodge? You drive into Lake Manyara National Park to be greeted by the sound of knocking beaks as migrating yellow-billed storks and great white pelicans squeezed on top of heavily laden acacias jostle for space. The trip through the park is a journey of discovery: you are treated to almost a full day's game drive that covers most of the reserve. Hippos sun themselves beside waterholes. There's a rare sighting of the tree-climbing lions; elephants; birds, flamingos, more birds; and trees, beautiful trees. Game-viewing vehicles thin out and suddenly you find you are the only vehicle around – everyone else has dropped back to leave the park in time for the 6pm cut-off, leaving you in luxurious peace. When you finally arrive at Lake Manyara Tree

Lodge, you are graciously greeted with a song and a frozen G&T.

What's special about it? You feel part of bush life; in fact, you could happily stay on your deck all day long and experience sightings as good as anything you could hope to see on a drive. Elephant walk right by you, a young bull trumpeting just metres away. Beautiful birds perch next to you. Monkeys shriek. It's so alive it makes your stomach knot. When you do manage to tear yourself away from your tree palace, the thousands of lesser flamingos that inhabit the lake are bright pink. The intimate lodge is relaxed and personal. Food is prepared with love and care, and the entire experience is thrilling and nurturing.

What should you pack? A combination of layers for cool mornings and evenings, and items to strip down to in the hotter middle of the day.

Describe a typical day? You wake up with the rising bush after a wild night, in sync with your surrounds. After a tailor-made breakfast you set off with your driver and guide for a full day of discovery in scenery that changes from acacia forests to baobabs on the Rift Valley escarpment, mahogany forests to flat savanna plains. The giraffe hanging out on the lake beach in the distance look like they're tanning. Lunch is back at the lodge, after which you retire to your deck for the afternoon. Come evening, you head back into your exclusive wilderness. You relax in your vehicle next to the lake watching the yellow-billed storks and pelicans coming in to land – it's like Heathrow on a busy day. By the second night, you're right at home and sleep like Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*.

Any special sightings? Tree-climbing lions and hot coral-pink lesser flamingos in their thousands.

High point? Everything.

Low point? Leaving.

Would you do anything differently next time around? I'd spend more time in my tree house and less time driving. There's so much to see from your deck and, after all, this is what makes Manyara Tree Lodge so very special. I'd also do one of the guided bike rides through the nearby Mayoka community to the lakeshore.

Would you go back? In a flash.

From? R6 516 per person sharing; www.www.andbeyondafrica.com – LT

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

THIS PAGE Thousands of flamingos lend Lake Manyara a delicate pink glow opposite, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT You'll be seduced for life by your suite at Lake Manyara Tree Lodge; the acacia-dominated woodlands provide the perfect habitat for giraffe; frozen G&Ts are a Lake Manyara Tree Lodge speciality; the tree-top suites are the epitome of African romance; elephants emerge from the forests, only to melt back into the bush seconds later



These giants of the animal kingdom need help. Despite their strength and cunning they're no match for a poacher's rifle. For 50 years WWF has been securing protected areas worldwide, but these aren't enough to stop the killing. To disrupt the sophisticated criminal gangs supplying animal parts to lucrative illegal markets, we are working with governments to toughen law enforcement. We're also working with consumers to reduce the demand for unlawful wildlife products. Help us look after the world where you live at www.wwf.org.za

where to stay now

HOTEL CENTRAL



HOME Swede HOME

HOTELS IN STOCKHOLM ARE A BRILLIANT REMINDER THAT HOTEL EXPERIENCES CAN AND SHOULD BE PLEASURABLE, EVEN SENSORY, AFFAIRS. OUR CHOICES FEEL JUST LIKE HOME. ONLY BETTER

ETT HEM HOTEL Stockholm

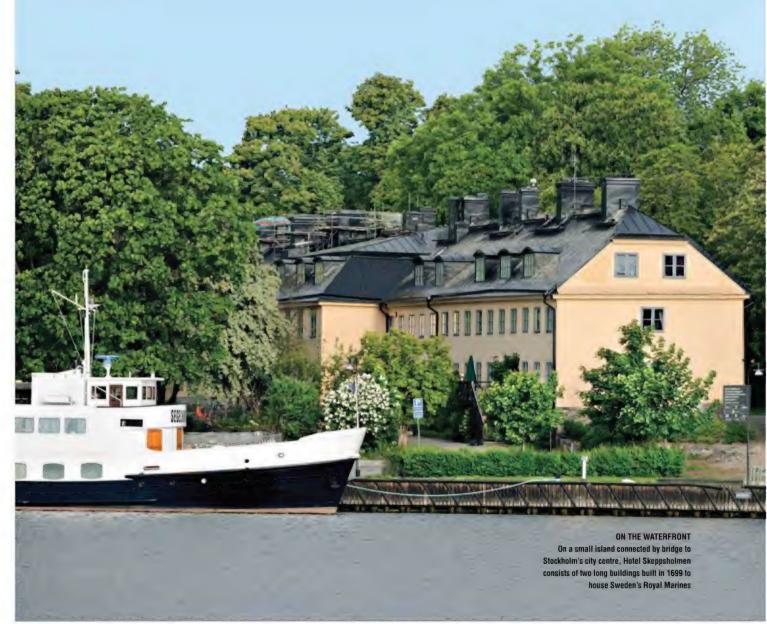
A brisk 10-minute walk from the centre of Stockholm and you're in the ambassadorial belt of Ostermalm, a leafy suburb where genteel red-brick buildings and elaborate villas are standard fare. I'd been eagerly anticipating my visit to the much-hyped Ett Hem Hotel, as I've long been a fan of British designer Ilse Crawford's aesthetic. I was not disappointed. With just 12 rooms, each individually designed in a personal and relaxed manner, it offers up a sophisticated yet unpretentious experience. Think wood panelling, marble baths and dramatic bespoke furniture (there are brass minibars in every room) offset by a soothing colour scheme, touchy-feely furnishings, antique ceramic fireplaces and exquisite lighting. Not to mention a fantastic collection of books you really want to read. 'It's full of the things that frame moments in life,' says owner Jeanette Mix. And while it offers all the services required by the modern traveller, there's none of the institutionalised hotel experiences we've come to expect. In fact, the staff have had to unlearn the rules of the hospitality industry, for at Ett Hem service is about what can happen, not what can't, Doubles from R4 324; www.etthemstockholm.se

- Kerryn Fischer

HOTEL SKEPPSHOLMEN Stockholm

This design hotel is hard to fault, what with its incredible location near Gamal Stan and just 10 minutes' drive from Bromma airport. The rooms are simple and modern, with a distinctive Scandinavian style and comfort level, particularly when it comes to the beds, linen and amazing bathroom amenities. It's close to nature, city walks, the river, the ferry, galleries and the city centre itself. The staff are professional, friendly and discreet, and are well versed on what's happening (that's worth knowing about) in the city. The hotel's restaurant Långa Raden serves delicious breakfasts, with a Continental version that seems to go on forever, while their lunches and dinners specialising in modern Swedish cuisine are effortlessly good. It's relatively inexpensive and is great value in terms of location, facilities and service levels. Doubles from R2 438; www.hotelskeppsholmen.com

- Paul van den Berg











STORY HOTEL Stockholm

This perfectly central hotel (close to the Stureplan and off the best shopping street in the city) is popular with locals and travellers alike, and seems to be a great meeting spot for breakfast or a drink at the bar. Warm, personal and edgy, it has nicely proportioned rooms that mix new and vintage furnishings with ease. Supercomfortable beds (they all come with an extra layer of down comforter) in crisp, ultrasoft linen are perfectly matched with walls plastered with scraps of old-fashioned wallpaper and posters. Originally an apartment building, the hotel has been cleverly transformed, reusing the original apartment doors (some marked 'Ingen reklam', 'No junk mail') as headboards for the beds. Some of the 82 rooms are tiny and others are noisy, but the hotel is upfront about these drawbacks, referring to the former as 'Super Squeeze' rooms and providing earplugs for the latter. Doubles from R1 928; www.storyhotels.com

-KF

SCANDI CANDY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A harmonious bedroom suite at Ett Hem; slick contemporary design rules in Story Hotel's interiors; in summer, Story's Backyard draws a hip local crowd; enjoy traditional Swedish cuisine with a modern twist at Hotel Skeppsholmen's Långa Raden Restaurant

Cape Town We're after those small, intimate places in Cape Town that are

......

KENSINGTON PLACE

BLACKHEATH LODGE

CAPE CADOGAN

CAPE HERITAGE HOTEL



WHERE?: High up on the slopes of Table Mountain in wind-free Higgovale overlooking the City Bowl.

WHY GO?: For the chance to chill out while gazing at one of the most spectacular Cape Town views you're likely to see - all the way from Table Mountain out over the harbour towards Darling and snow-capped mountains in winter.

VIBE?: An intimate contemporary haven. Far from the madding crowds of Kloof Street, just a short walking distance away.

CHECK-IN: Quick, fuss-free and with a complimentary glass of bubbly to make the time whizz by.

FACILITIES?: The DVD player and library, iPod speakerdock, in-room laptop and free WiFi make you feel right at home.

CLIENTELE? European and American couples enjoying the sights of the Mother City.

EATING &: It's worth spending the night just for DRINKING?: the eggs Benedict in the morning.

HIGH: The frothy cappuccinos delivered POINT?: by room service in the morning.

LOW: If you were to nitpick, the decor could POINT?: probably use an update. ROOM TO: Room 1 has the best views of Table

BOOK?: Mountain, while Room 8 is very private and has its own entrance.

PRICE?: Doubles from R3 290 B&B; www.kensingtonplace.co.za - Jason Probert



In Sea Point, close to the beaches and a large selection of restaurants within walking distance.

It's intimate and accessible. The rooms are very spacious, and personally decorated. The effort that all at Blackheath Lodge go to in order to make your stay comfortable and memorable is unique.

A hands-on, no-fuss environment that makes you feel welcome.

Fast, with early check-in or late check-out easily organised.

Free Wifi, dedicated staff available 24 hours. Find a 'to do' pack in your room of finely selected information, maps and suggested activities.

Lots of return travellers. Mostly foreigners, although they have a loyal group of local business travellers.

A delicious breakfast menu is freshly prepared each morning. Picnics and dinner available on request.

The best beds ever! Extra-length king-size beds with beautiful linen and comfy bedding.

The two-bedroom Loft Suite has incredible views of the ocean and Sea Point skyline and a small kitchen. Doubles from R1 650 B&B;

www.blackheathlodge.co.za - Luanne Toms

In the hub of Kloof Street, which is a 10-minute drive from Table Mountain and 15 from Camps Bay and Clifton beaches, and the V&A.

It's a great place for people who want to be in the centre of everything. Good for tourists and business travellers alike.

It makes it feel like you're on holiday in the middle of a city. Interiors inside the Victorian building, which is over 100 years old, are stylish, simple, clean.

Our check-in was easy and efficient. We were shown around the room.

Free WiFi, swimming pool and a free shuttle to the V&A if needed.

The guests were smart yet relaxed.

Breakfast only - choose from a cold buffet or a hot menu. At 5pm they put out free snacks, and there is an honesty bar for drinks; port and sherry are offered later.

Very comfortable room, breakfast was great. Wide selection of fruit and yoghurts and a hot breakfast.

There could be more plug points for things like cellphone chargers.

For visits of over a week, choose the extended stay area - you get your own apartment, breakfast included.

From R1 600 per person sharing B&B; www.capecadogan.co.za - Sue Stewart



In the heart of town - Greenmarket Square and other City Bowl sites are a short walk away.

Location. This boutique hotel is the perfect home base for first-time travellers to Cape Town. Plus, the staff is attentive and friendly.

It doesn't look like much from outside but inside it's surprisingly spacious. Each of the 17 rooms is decorated differently, with an eclectic mix of old and new.

Check-in is smooth, with tongue-incheek house rules about carrying your own luggage damaging your health.

Free WiFi and a rooftop Jacuzzi, which is perfect for post-hike soaks. Parking costs extra and is across the road in a city parking lot.

Don't expect to hear many South Africa accents. Foreign travellers flock here in droves.

Breakfast only. Enjoy a bowl of organic oats or a stack of French toast in the shady central courtyard or in the kitchen, which adds to the homely vibe.

Having so many off-site dining options right on your doorstep - from fine dining to hipster cuisine.

None, but light sleepers should ensure they request a quiet room.

Room 104, aka 'The Honeymoon Suite': it is beautifully decorated, with an Olympic-sized bath.

Doubles from R1 200 B&B; www.capeheritage.co.za – Delené van der Lugt

holidays in themselves, and offer an experience that is a world away from the generic hotel stay

CHAPMAN'S PEAK HOTEL

HOUT BAY MANOR

DOCK HOUSE

ELLERMAN HOUSE



Twenty minutes' drive from the CBD in picturesque Hout Bay.

The village of Hout Bay, 20 minutes' from Cape Town.



Overlooking the V&A Waterfront and the Port of Cape Town.



Perched on the edge of a cliff in Bantry Bay between Sea Point and Clifton.

Not in the mood for the bustle of town? Unwind in this seaside hotel and fall asleep to the swishing of the sea that is visible from the comfort of your spacious bed.

The main building is over a 100 years old with vintage soundproofing (read none). The slick modern section was designed to blend in with the surroundings. Family run, it feels like a home away from home.

A bit stop-start as the key-card machine was playing up. Strangely, the receptionist was barefoot.

Free WiFi and a decent-sized pool with amazing views.
Roof-top parking is included.

Locals for the food, and foreigners for the location. It's also a popular conference facility for Joburgers.

The calamari at the hotel's gastro pub is a local legend. The room service menu was limited but well priced. There are off-site dining options within walking distance.

Breakfast on the terrace with fabulous views of Hout Bay and the Sentinel.

None.

The rooms facing the mountain are very pleasant, but it's worth spending extra for a sea view.

Doubles from R1 840 B&B; www. chapmanspeakhotel.co.za - D vdl With its nostalgic Cape Dutch influences and cutting-edge interior design, it's the perfect place to switch off and relax or glam up and enjoy a glass of bubbly at the bar followed by dinner at Pure.

Relaxed, sophisticated, personal and intimate. The friendly, mindful staff allows for a personal and fun experience.

Check-in was fast and efficient.

Free WiFi, the small Inzolo Wellness Spa offers wonderful treatments at very reasonable rates, along with concierge service.

It's a romantic escape so lots of couples, both local and foreign. It's a place for those-in-the-know.

Hout Bay Manor offers breakfast and lunch, and you can book a table at Pure for a fine dining experience. Or head into Hout Bay, which has loads of eateries to choose from.

Decor is a feast, a fun history lesson and an inspiration.

Pure, the restaurant, was empty and a little lacking in atmosphere.

'The Sotho' has a lush private garden terrace where you can enjoy an open-air shower.

Doubles from R3 200 B&B; www.houtbaymanor.com Go for the spectacular location, views and soothing decor that is deeply luxurious but never bling. Once the harbour master's home, this gracious five-star boutique hotel with just six rooms honours its Victorian heritage. Dock House exudes understated elegance and unpretentious,

and laid-back.

Just a simple form to fill in once

you're in your room with a view, and a

low-key luxury that feels intimate

complimentary bottle of bubbly to sip.
Urban Beauty spa, swimming
pool, gym, free WiFi, library with
complimentary laptop and colour
printer, 24-hour butler service.

Discerning leisure travellers and sophisticated international tourists.

Enjoy a delicious breakfast in the elegant breakfast room. There's a cool pool bar, plus you're on the doorstep of a myriad top restaurants and watering holes in the V&A.

Strolling out the gate directly into the buzzing V&A Waterfront for sundowners and dinner.

Some noise from the harbour and V&A penetrates your room at night.

Room 5, which leads onto a deck with panoramic views and has a large bathroom also opening onto the deck.

Doubles from R4 495 B&B; www.newmarkhotels.com

- Sally Rutherford

It's a five-star boutique hotel that offers flawless service and privacy, incredible cuisine, panoramic views and superlative accommodation in an idyllic setting.

Discreet and intimate with a jetset clientele.

No check-in - heaven!

Spa, gym, library, two swimming pools, beautiful contemporary art gallery, free WiFi, airport transfers and transfers within a 15km radius.

Landed gentry, captains of industry and international jetset.

Delicious food for lunch, dinner and breakfast, with a special wellness spa menu. The complimentary inroom bar has premium brands and the guest pantry is filled with snacks.

Leaving after a night of sublime luxury to discover that my car had been washed.

Our spa room had no duvet covers, so we had to request extra linen.

A contemporary villa room if you have kids, or one in the old part of the hotel for a nostalgic atmosphere.

Doubles from R5 500 B&B; www.ellerman.co.za - Kerryn Fischer



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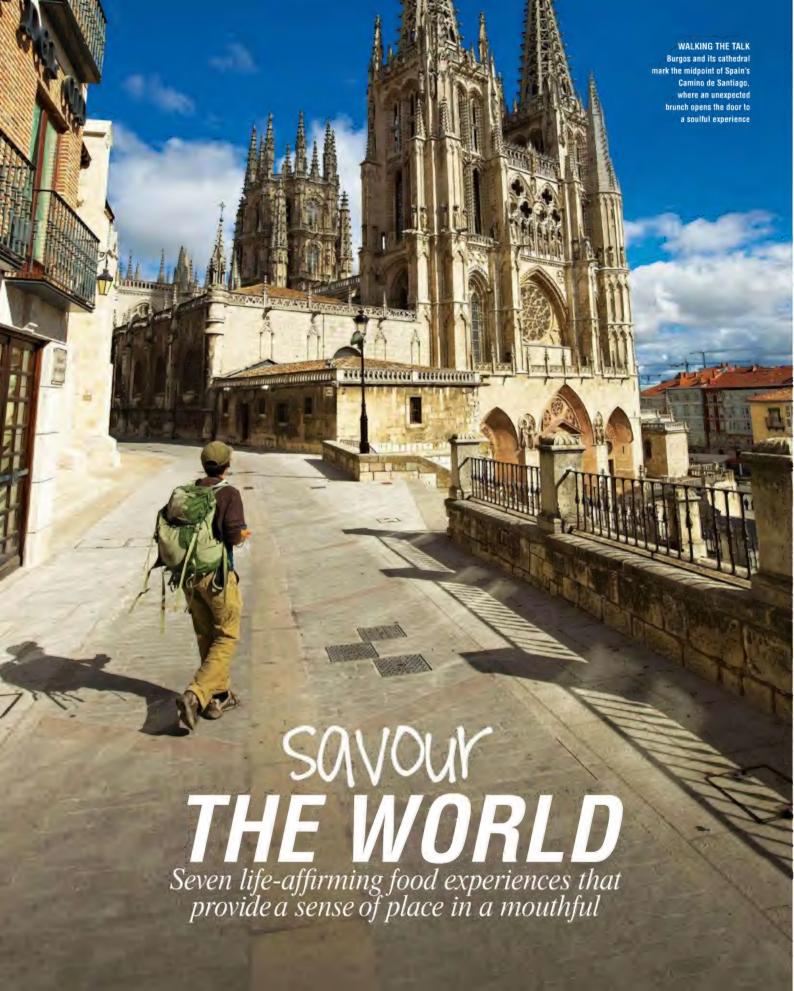
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FOOD FOR A WEARY SOUL

A brunch opens doors for a pilgrim on Spain's Camino de Santiago by andrew mccarthy

It had already been a long slog. I had started in the south of France. crossed the Pyrenees Mountains to Pamplona, Spain, trudged through the wine district of La Rioja, then made my way through the city of Burgos and across Spain's high and barren central plains, I was more than halfway into an 800-kilometre trek along the classic route for the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage that ends in the Galician capital of Santiago de Compostela, where, according to Catholic tradition, the bones of Saint James were discovered in the ninth century. After three weeks I'd made few friends among the other pilgrims I'd encountered. My schoolboy Spanish had proven woefully inadequate with the locals. I was tired, lonely and unhappy. But I tromped on, knowing that failure would result in a disgrace more unbearable than my misery.

For several days the talk along the way had been of a steep gain in elevation when the route climbed to O Cebreiro, a village perched at 1 306 metres in a mountain pass between the Ancares and Courel mountain ranges. This climb was said to be even more challenging than the Pyrenees, which had nearly ended my journey before it began.

Just past dawn I set out alone – as usual – from the village of Vega de Valcarce and began my way toward O Cebreiro. By mid-morning I'd reached a small village beyond which the climb into the mountains began. Hungry, I found a solitary restaurant. I pushed on the heavy wooden door and entered a deep, unlit room with dark furniture.

A man stepped through a doorway behind the bar, I explained my needs as best I could. He said the chef had yet to arrive and the restaurant wouldn't open for a few hours. My pack sagged heavy on my back. It would be a long climb on an empty stomach. I turned to go.

As I reached for the door he called after me. 'Espera,' he said. 'Wait.' I stopped. He told me he had just returned from a morning of fishing, would I care for some trout? I dislike fish but I appreciated his generosity. I sat down in the dark to wait. Twenty minutes later he appeared with a plate bearing two small, whole trout, each with Serrano ham wedged inside, 'Trucha a la Navarra,' he said. 'It is a local dish.' Then he left, and without enthusiasm I picked up my fork. The white flesh literally fell from the bone; the ham was as dense and rich as the fish was light and moist. I ate slowly and with great care. Alone in the shadowy room, I felt myself finally arrive in Spain.

When I'd finished, my host returned and we chatted. My Spanish suddenly had a confidence it had lacked for weeks. We talked of the camino, of fishing, of America; we parted friends.

I marched on up to O Cebreiro without strain. I felt like the man I would have liked myself to be but rarely was. The next two weeks passed in a blaze of synchronicity and fellowship. When I finally strode onto the streets of Santiago de Compostela, I was filled with a joy and gratitude that I haven't forgotten to this day, 15 years later.

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

Life lessons at the Marin Farmers Market By Andrew Nelson

Many people who visit San Francisco have heard about the farmers market held thrice weekly in front of the historic Ferry Building. But it took Susan Cagann, the wife of my college friend Chuck Finnie, to introduce me to its busy counterpart on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Marin Farmers Market. Held every Sunday on the parking lot of San Rafael's dazzling Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Civic Center (which is worth a trip in itself), the Marin Market invites patrons to sample, literally, the tastes of place. This Sunday I'm in town from my home base of New Orleans. 'Let's go to the farmers market and get us something yummy,' suggests Susan.

Wright probably never envisioned his monument to good governance as a venue for the lean and hungry scrum that I find: wet-suited surfers back from shredding waves at Stinson Beach; glossy-haired yoga moms; mountain bikers still sweaty from the trip up Mount Tamalpais, Marin County's highest peak. The crowds come to shop for the usual fruits and vegetables, of course, but also to peruse more exotic California fare: organic ghee, fresh seaweed, purple scallions, kettle-corn-flavoured sorbet and succulent oro blanco grapefruit with flesh the colour of a good sauvignon blanc. The market is a hive of activity: pinching, tasting, sniffing and – for the man playing the steel drums – thumping. Shoppers queue for a cup of coffee from Remedy, the Oakland roaster; pay R312 a kilogram for line-caught

local salmon; snag nice wedges of whole-milk cheese, wrapped in nettle leaves, that were crafted in Petaluma.

Ever since I've known her, Susan has prowled for new tastes and sensations. 'Always keep a corkscrew and a blanket in your car boot,' she advises. 'You never know when you will need them for a picnic.' She navigates the market's bustle with a practised ease, squeezing past the just-picked edible flowers and salad greens. She has her egg guy and her berry man - whose raspberries are so red, so lustrous, that they resemble rubies. The peaches glow like fire, orange and yellow and beaded with a sugary sweat. She buys a dozen for the bowl she keeps piled with market fruit to tempt her two sons, Tad and Will. 'If they can see it, they'll eat it,' she explains, 'I'm training them like dogs,'

We walk past the RoliRoti rotisserie; the roasting chicken and rosemary aromas awaken my appetite. Susan stops for green beans, potatoes and Persian melons. The shopping done, we exit smiling. And why not? In a place such as this, even the most ordinary of tasks takes on a savoury richness.

Two months later Susan suffers a brain aneurysm and dies. Back for her funeral, I see in the fruit bowl a few oranges streaked with crimson. They are all that remain from her last trip to the market. I peel one, break apart a section and put it to my lips. Its taste is intense, juicy and sorrowfully sweet.







THE OBJECT OF MY CONFECTION

At Antwerp's century-old Van Hecke waffle house, the irons are gas-fired and the waffles sublime BY CHRISTOPHER HALL

Her name, Zorica, didn't sound very Belgian to me, but she promised I would not find a better waffle in all of Antwerp. 'Wouldn't you like to order one?' Lured by a toasty smell, I had stumbled upon the Van Hecke waffle house while wandering through Antwerp late one dark winter afternoon, when the cathedral's soaring Gothic bell tower had already dissolved into silhouette. Icy snow was spitting from the overcast sky, pricking my face like tiny needles.

'Sure,' I told Zorica, then stood at a front counter to watch as she went to work on a Brussels-style waffle. During two decades of regular visits to Antwerp, I'd eaten my weight in waffles - small, dense and sweet Liège-style ones as well as thick, yeasty Brussels waffles. In the land of their origin they're an afternoon treat, piled with strawberrytopped mountains of whipped cream and washed down with strong coffee. The good burghers of Antwerp seem most mad for waffles in summer, when tables and chairs spill from cafés onto cobblestone streets and squares.

Zorica opened a hinged, blackened waffle iron and held her hand directly over it to gauge the heat. 'Everything I do, I do by feel and smell,' she said, explaining that the shop's heavy original irons were heated with a gas flame and, unlike electric irons in other waffle houses, had no timer or thermostat. The batter sizzled when it hit the hot metal. She closed the iron.

While the waffle cooked, Zorica shared with me that she was born in Yugoslavia in 1967. She'd come to Antwerp 17 years earlier, worked at Van Hecke's, and eventually bought the shop from the owners, keeping the vintage '60s decor. 'I learned all about making waffles with my eyes,' she told me, 'not from books or school.'

When Zorica decided my waffle was done, she flipped it onto a plate and asked if I wanted whipped cream. 'No,' I said. 'If this is going to be the best waffle I've ever eaten, I want only the waffle.' She sprinkled it with powdered sugar.

From the first bite, I could tell this was one hell of a waffle. Piping hot, with a smell as deep and golden as Indian-summer sunlight, it was incomparably crisp and brown on the outside, light and almost creamy on the inside. Zorica smiled, 'You see what I mean?' she asked, I nodded back, unable to stop eating.

Was it the best waffle I have ever eaten? Or was it simply a very good waffle made perfect by the moment - the nasty weather, the warmth of the irons and of Zorica's smile? I'm still not sure. Zorica asked if I wanted anything else, and I said, 'Yes, I'd like one to go.' I left five minutes later, the waffle warming my hands through a thin paper napkin. As I walked I took a bite; a cascade of sugar dusted my coat and mingled there with specks of snow. In the darkness of the afternoon, I couldn't tell which was which.

A LATE SUMMER'S NIGHT FEAST

August in Sweden? It's Crayfish time! By RAPHAEL KADUSHIN

This happened nine summers ago on a Swedish island so small you could cross it in one exhilarating hike without breaking stride. At the time I didn't know the name of the island and barely knew the names of the people I followed off the ferry. There was a Kierstin, a Mako, maybe a Sven, though it's possible I got the name wrong. It didn't really matter. Once we found the right spot, on a grassy hill, we'd spend the night getting acquainted while gorging on crayfish.

Summer crayfish slumber parties have been a Swedish tradition since the early 1900s, when this freshwater crustacean - considered a delicacy – was threatened by overfishing, prompting a restriction on the fishing season. The new regulation made August the month for crayfish, and though much of the catch consumed these days is imported, the parties, called kräftskiva, are as popular as ever. My night in the Baltic Sea on a Swedish lick of land named Grinda upended every cliché about Scandinavians flattened by long winters. The Swedes I saw were infused by a rousing sense of whimsy.

Kjerstin was determined to do right by tradition, so there were slices of Västerbotten cheese and loaves of bread, including one baked in the shape of a crayfish. There were paper party hats, paper lanterns depicting a smiling moon and bottles of potent aquavit. And, mostly, there were buckets brimming with crayfish, boiled to a bright red in salt water and seasoned with heaps of fresh dill.

We unfurled blankets on the crown of that Grinda hill and watched Kjerstin demonstrate how to eat crayfish in high Swedish style: snap off the claws, crack the shell, suck out the juices. My first taste was the purest; the crustacean flavour was startling, at once salty and sweet, the briny accents undercut by the grassy dill. It seemed a distillation of all the top notes of the north.

Everyone began by following Kjerstin's form. But as the night wore on and shots of schnapps toasted Abba songs blaring from a boombox, the slurping grew louder. Then bits of crayfish started flying, shellfish shrapnel that bounced off our paper party hats, from Mako's Chineseopera hat to Kjerstin's floppy beret to my good-luck yarmulke. When Sven plopped a wreath of cravfish shells on his head, ran down to the sea and hurled himself in with an epic splash, we barely noticed.

We could hear laughter from other crayfish parties being held under the fat August moon. This was a ceremonial feast, but it was also a reminder of other things. The light was already turning dense and autumnal, a sign of the shifting seasons. These crayfish parties, I saw, weren't just wild picnics. They were defiant end-of-summer parties, last gasps before Nordic blizzards swept in and everything darkened again.

I would never see Kierstin or Mako or Sven again, but our shared night under that summer moon has remained an enduring memory a tiny yet transcendent defence against all the winters still to come.

THE DESERT COURSE

On a journey with a camel caravan into the vast Sahara, meal and memory become one by donovan webster

The day began at 4am in Niger's Ténéré desert, a virtually uninhabited sea of sand about the size of Germany in the lower reaches of the great Sahara desert. I was travelling with a 500-camel caravan that had departed from the Sahara's southern boundary two weeks earlier en route to a salt-rich oasis called Bilma, still a few hundred kilometres to our northeast. There the caravan, led by Tuareg tribesmen, would trade its herd of sheep and goats, plus loads of household goods, for huge pillars of salt vital to people and livestock. The caravan would then turn around and find its way home. The round-trip would take a month.

We had awoken before dawn, under a setting moon, after only four hours of sleep. Chains of dunes sculpted by relentless desert winds ran northeast from our camp. We made a small fire to boil water for tea. At dawn, everyone with me – Aboubacar, Ali, Bilal, Hima and my good friend Mohamed Ixa – took a few minutes to wash and pray, the first of five such breaks each day. The sun climbed. The morning became increasingly hot and dry. In the middle of the Sahara, daytime temperatures can swing by as much as 20°C and humidity may plummet to a mere 4 percent. To retain water, Tuareg tribesmen cover their mouths and noses with the ends of their turban-like *cheches* until only their eyes show. We drank water we carried in goatskins. We ate dried beef and millet mixed with goat milk (it tasted like spoiled liquid yoghurt and soggy Rice Krispies). We never stopped moving.

Around 4pm, Mohamed came to me. 'Tm taking a goat and water and a few other things ahead,' he said. 'Follow my tracks. When the food is ready, if you haven't found me, I will find you.'

He left carrying firewood and a metal box. The withering wind and sun stayed. We walked. Animals bellowed. Someone beat time on a brass bell, the lonely sound rolling away from us. About 40 minutes before sunset, I saw Mohamed far ahead, waiting for us atop a dune, his *cheche* and robes billowing in the wind against a cloudless sky.

When we arrived, what Mohamed had done seemed impossible. At the centre of a small rectangular carpet sat a container of water (cooled by the evaporation of a soaked burlap cover), a bowl of olives and one of nuts. He gestured for us to sit down. 'Relax,' he said.

We talked, munched. Overhead, the sky turned sunset blue. Hot soup arrived: pasta and water flavoured with garlic and spices and stock cubes. Mohamed and Hima had also made traditional Tuareg bread, a mix of flour and yeast that had risen inside a damp cloth, then been baked in the sand beneath the fire's coals. It was crusty and still warm. Gradually, the sky darkened and stars emerged. Then came the main event: goat ragout, with reconstituted dried tomatoes and okra and broad beans on a bed of rice. The goat was chopped bite-size and was fall-apart tender. The sauce, red and peppery and smoky, had a glint of lemon. In the gathering dark, under shooting stars, we began to feel strong again. The camels waited, shifting their burdens.

By 9pm, as we drank sweet, minty tea from shot-glass cups, conversation had died down. Mohamed pointed to a cluster of stars that had peeked above the horizon, then turned to me. 'Those are the Pleiades,' he said. 'They point northeast at night, which is our direction. It is time. Prepare to go.' And so we did, the meal now inseparable from the Sahara itself.



A TONIC FOR THE MORNING AFTER

New Orleans loves a fun night – and a next-day recovery by wayne curtis

Half a dozen years ago I flew to New Orleans on a research trip. I arrived at my hotel early in the evening, then immediately set out to hunt up some of that fabled New Orleans fare - maybe étouffée or a po'boy. But first, a cocktail. I walked into a handsome, old-fashioned bar a couple of blocks from my hotel and ordered a drink. Long story short: the bar was wonderful, the drinks sublime, the bartender amiable, the company superb, the night long. The evening's episode confirmed one of my preconceptions about the Big Easy: that it's more or less designed and managed for the continuous consumption of adult beverages. The next day I made another, less publicised discovery: New Orleans is also perfectly crafted for what writer George Ade called 'the cold, grey dawn of the morning after'.

The morning after, as anyone who has suffered a hangover knows, can be filled with jagged edges. New Orleans mornings, to their credit, utterly lack sharp edges. They often appear swaddled in a soft, humid haze that blunts the unwelcome rays of the sun, which are further filtered through the cast-iron railings of the French Quarter. The sounds are of distant horses quietly clip-clopping as they pull tourist carriages and of freshly watered plants drip-dropping through their hanging baskets on the balconies above.

The city, famous for its Creole and Cajun cuisine, has evolved its own restorative for the morning after. The hair of the dog here is the creamy Ramos gin fizz, the ethereal gin-based cocktail that is shaken

into a curative froth. Note that you needn't go to special places in New Orleans to find Ramos gin fizzes or equally refreshing brandy milk punches. They're served pretty much anywhere that does both breakfast and cocktails - including Brennan's Restaurant, which is where I next made my way.

To salvage something from my hangover day I would need ballast and sustenance. Brennan's specialises in eggs slathered in rich sauces served on things like Holland rusks and artichokes. It's as if a plate of eggs Benedict awoke one morning, decided it just wasn't showy enough and tried on extravagant new outfits. The eggs Sardou I ordered came out in two rounded, comforting heaps atop creamed spinach. They looked to me like a pair of large Valiums on a plate. For those who don't understand the appeal of such elaborate breakfasts, Brennan's may be the place to change your mind. The venerable eatery has turned the morning meal into a rococo art form, where the food becomes the equivalent of an ornate chapel ceiling. It may seem a bit overwhelming at first, but stay with it and it will ultimately prove very soothing - all the more so if you are in a fugue state.

One has to applaud the genius of a city that provides not only a complication but its resolution. Clearly, the wise old streets of New Orleans had much to teach me. So, shortly after that fateful trip six years ago, I packed up and moved to the city. I was right, I still learn something new nearly every day.

SERVE OVER ICE

Raw seal liver, a delicacy among the Inuit of Baffin Island, is most nutritious if eaten just after the kill By Jonathan B Tourtellot

We float on water that is briefly ice free; it is August and the last floes have left the fiord. The two Inuit men. Jonas and Juelie, have stilled the engine on the freighter canoe. Juelie waits, watching the barely rippling water mirroring the cobalt Arctic sky, his rifle ready. Looking for dinner. A small oblong object suddenly pokes through the wavering reflection: it's the head of a ringed seal. Blat! The rifle shot misses, and the head vanishes. No problem. The seal can't go far without a breath. Hunting is how the Inuit traditionally have fed themselves, which prompted the highly unusual culinary experience I'm about to enjoy.

Wanting a taste of traditional Inuit life, I've joined the locals on a subsistence hunt for common ringed and bearded seals. (This hunt has no connection with the controversial, and discontinued, clubbing of infant harp seal pups for their white fur in southeastern Canada; different people, different seals, different rationale, in a different land.) For 4 000 years up here in the Arctic, people have lived on seal, fish, narwhal, caribou and other beasts of sea and land. Only in the eyeblink of summer do berries from tundra plants augment the traditional diet. Those few handfuls do not provide enough vitamin C, and early anthropologists wondered why the whole population didn't collapse from scurvy. It turned out that sea creatures carry quite a bit of vitamin C. Seal livers in particular are rich in it - richest of all when eaten raw.

Inuit ('the people' in the local Inuktitut language) is the preferred term up in these parts - not Eskimo, which comes from a pejorative Cree term meaning 'he eats it raw.' The Eskimo expression was disseminated by white people, who then added injury to insult: in the name of doing good, they herded the nomadic Inuit into settlements and sent the children to schools, the adults to church and everyone to the Hudson Bay store for such exotic foods as sweets and Kool-Aid. The result was wholesale destruction of Inuit culture and Inuit teeth. Only in recent years has the healthier native diet, known as 'country food', been coming back into vogue. It takes getting used to. I'd already tried one item, preserved mattaaq, or whale blubber. I'd found the taste and chewing sensation a Michelin experience – as in the tyre, not the culinary guide.

The seal resurfaces. Blat! This time the shot connects - an instant kill. Jonas guns the canoe's engine and brings the hunters to their quarry. They haul the seal aboard and head for shore. Once aground, Jonas swiftly, expertly butchers the mammal and happily samples something from inside it. With a firmly steeled stomach, I accept pieces of raw tenderloin and liver, still faintly warm. And the taste is ... not bad! A little oily but not at all fishy. And totally tender. Steak tartare, ocean style.

Hey, what do the Cree know?



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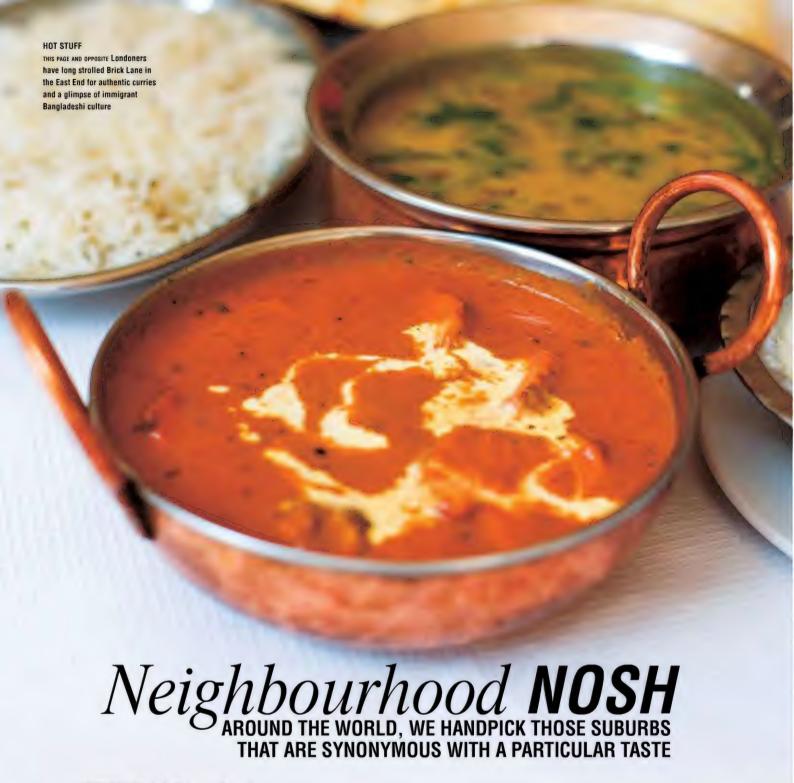
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CURRY Brick Lane, London

Like the fragrant curries found in abundance here, Brick Lane – the lively thoroughfare that meanders through Spitalfields in the scruffy East End of London – is a true melting pot. This cultural crossroads has offered shelter to waves of immigrants since the 17th century, including French Huguenots, Eastern European Jews and, recently, South Asians, most notably roughly 60 000 Bangladeshis. Here, in tight rooms decorated with flocked wallpaper and twanging with the sound of sitars, the definitive English curry – a hybrid of colonial comfort food and Indian classics prepared with a Bangladeshi accent – was canonised. Top contenders on the curry scene include Bengal Village and Gram Bangla, a spot known for its home-style cooking where the neighbourhood's latest round of immigrants – hipsters – sup elbow-to-elbow with families gathered after mosque.

- Sarah Karnasiewicz



NOODLE ROLLS Ngu Xa village, Hanoi

Once a Vietnamese village known for its brass casting, Ngu Xa, on Hanoi's Truc Bach lake, is now synonymous with another lustrous product: pho cuon, silky white sheets of uncut pho soup noodles wrapped around fried beef, lettuce and coriander, and dunked in nuoc cham (fish sauce with lime, rice vinegar, garlic and chilli). Light and fresh, soft yet crunchy - and cheap (R10 buys 10 rolls) - pho cuon has become trendy enough for 60-odd speciality restaurants to materialise in the environs. Mrs Chinh of Chinh Thang, a family-run restaurant at 7 Mac Dinh Chi Street, maintains she conceived the dish 10 years ago after she ran out of broth and persuaded some late-night revellers looking for a bowl of noodle soup to eat her leftovers as rolls. Others claim the dish is actually a retro trend; the fact that it resurfaced by a lake called Truc Bach, which often translates as 'White Silk', is poetic happenstance. - Connla Stokes

CHOCOLATE Grand Sablon Square, Brussels

With so many artisanal chocolate makers, Brussels can seem like one big bulging chocolate box. But if you're short of time, head to the venerable Grand Sablon Square for a taste of Brussels' two contrasting approaches to the cocoa bean. Chocolatier Pierre Marcolini's hand-dipped chocolates, plucked from glass cases by clerks wearing clinical white gloves, come infused with unexpected, pupil-dilating flavours (yuzu, a Japanese citrus; tonka bean; Moroccan pink pepper berries; bergamot; mango). Wittamer, on the other hand, is all old-school elegance, its display cases filled with classic pralines and green pistachio bonbons. If you have room for only one taste, though, make it the heart-shaped raspberry chocolate that could pass for Brussels' own abiding valentine. - Raphael Kadushin

TIGER-NUT MILK Barrio del Carmen, Valencia

You needn't wander far in Valencia before stumbling across a street cart hawking the cool milky drink called orxata (Valencian for horchata) to locals during their almuerzo (midday meal). But a stroll through the crooked, cobbled streets of Barrio del Carmen reveals the city's few remaining horchaterías. Likely introduced by Moors between the eighth and 13th centuries and made with pulped chufas (tiger nuts), horchata falls in the shadow of Valencia's other iconic foods (paella, oranges and tomatoes) but is such a part of the city's identity that it's controlled by a regulatory council that protects the beverage with Denominación de Origen status. First stop is the 200-year-old Horchatería de Santa Catalina. Across the street, Horchatería El Siglo is the newcomer, opened in 1836. Inside, a discreet balcony overlooks black-and-white checkerboard tiles and gold-trimmed neoclassical mirrors, while umbrella-topped tables spill onto the front patio, an ideal place to people-watch over a slushy horchata granizado and a plateful of fartons - cakey, oblong pastries that remain a traditional accompaniment to the drink. - Adam H Graham

ICE CREAM Recoleta, Buenos Aires

There's another side to Buenos Aires beyond grilled beef – a much cooler, creamier side. Put simply, porteños (locals) are insane for ice cream. Denser than most American ice creams and available in a



kaleidoscope of exotic flavours – maracuyá (passionfruit), chocolate with Cointreau, dulce de leche with caramelized almonds, or even cerveza (beer!) - helado is an Argentine riff on traditional gelato, which arrived in the city at the turn of the 20th century along with a large influx of Italian immigrants. Today, you'd be hard-pressed to walk a block without seeing someone strolling with a cone or pausing at a corner café over a cup. Each neighbourhood has dozens of heladerias, and every local a favourite, but two of the most revered outposts -Un' Altra Volta and newcomer Arkakaó - can be found in the posh, tree-lined district of Recoleta. Both shops have streamlined contours, use all-natural ingredients and prepare fresh batches each day - and both can be more expensive than other heladerias in the city. But then again, who ever said perfection came cheap? - Sarah Karnasiewicz

SAVOURY PANCAKES Tsukishima, Tokyo

Beneath the refined face of Japanese cuisine thrives what the locals call 'B-grade gourmet' - low-cost, no-frills but tasty fare such as ramen and yakitori. In Tokyo, nothing better represents that epicurean underbelly than monjayaki, a dish that comes to the table as a bowl of runny batter mixed with a choice of meat, fish and finely chopped vegetables, before diners fry it into a sticky pancake. Originating as a children's snack – and designed to ensure nothing went to waste - monjayaki remains unique to the Greater Tokyo area. To try it, head to Tsukishima - dubbed 'Monja Town' - a manmade island that neighbours former Edo-era fishing communities in Tokyo Bay. Among Tsukishima's high-rise condos you'll find some 80 monjayaki joints that serve as reminders of the area's working-class roots. Try Noto, which has walls plastered with the signatures of visiting Japanese celebs and sports stars. Just don't be put off by the slightly run-down interiors and aging tatami mat flooring; the monja here is some of the best in Tokyo. - Rob Goss



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FARMERS MARKETS OUR PICK OF EUROPE'S AGE-OLD

FOOD BAZAARS

BY RAPHAEL KADUSHIN PHOTOGRAPH SANDRA RACCANELLO/SIME

For centuries now, no European hausfrau would plan a daily menu without checking in with regional suppliers and pinching the local produce for ripeness - it's called going to market. And Europe's food markets still offer authentic local experiences to travellers and lessons in culinary and cultural traditions.

NASCHMARKT Vienna, Austria

Vienna's snaking strip of an alfresco market may have started as a mittel European buffet, but today the variety of goods and delicacies sold here reflects the city's blended population. You can still find wooden barrels, big enough to bathe in, filled with sauerkraut, but there are also Iranian figs, Java peppers, Tunisian olive oil and Italian prosciutto. Surrounding stalls dish up everything from gyros to Shanghai dumplings as well as schnitzel served every which way.

COURS SALEYA Nice, France

This sun-splashed market has colourful striped awnings tenting the vendors' stalls and an inviting array of fresh flowers. Local chefs scour the stalls for the Provençal harvest, including white asparagus, olives and eggplants. But if you're more interested in eating on-site, grab a slice of the socca, a buttery chickpea-flour crêpe that vendors cut into strips and drop into paper cones. Don't miss: the house where Matisse once lived, painted a burst of yellow, which anchors the old town plaza filled with vendors selling signature Niçoise treats.

RIALTO MARKETS Venice, Italy

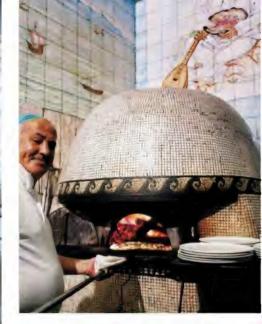
Before the gondolas crowd the Grand Canal with their daily crop of people, a grittier flotilla of barges, piled with fresh produce and every kind of daily catch, floats down the waterway at dawn. The procession supplies the morning-only Rialto market, just around the corner from its namesake bridge, with its pyramids of fruits and vegetables. The fish stalls of the adjoining seafood market have drawn locals for centuries for the soft-shell crabs and razor clams that show up in the best trattoria risottos and evoke Venice's defining briny flavour.

BOQUERIA MERCAT Barcelona, Spain

A pillar of Barcelona's central boulevard La Rambla, the wroughtiron Boqueria is a city landmark opened in 1840. One of the largest indoor food markets in Europe, the gastronomic hub features a marathon Catalan food spread, including Ibérico ham, wild forest mushrooms and a section of seafood called the Island of Fish. The market's cluster of bars and cafés shows off what locals can do with that bounty; an obligatory breakfast at the Pinotxo tapas bar near the Boqueria's main entrance should start with the pillowy salt cod croquettes and a cortado - espresso with steamed milk.

{TASTE OF TRAVEL} toodie tixes





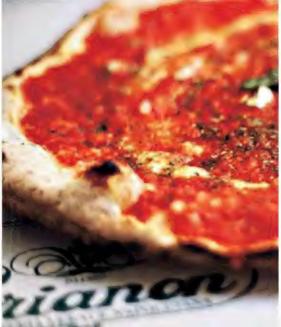


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EVERYDAY GOURMET

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Caerphilly cheese made at Gorwydd Farm, Wales; at Trianon Da Cira, Naples, pizzas are baked in a wood-fired oven; Stohrer eye candy in Paris; pizza basics rule in Naples, where toppings are pared back to the pure essentials; eat where the locals dine for the best taste of Greece; an array of meze — meaning small plate — offers a delicious taste of Greece

'lands of milk and honey promise new tastes in new places'



EAT

PARIS PATISSERIES

Five of the best

The perfect Parisian patisserie: is it a grand establishment with centuries-old baking traditions? A nouveau spot that blends daring flavours and artistry? Or the neighbourhood gem that locals hope will remain their secret? The answer is simple: all of the above.

LADURÉE 8TH ARRONDISSEMENT

When it opened in 1862, Ladurée was one of the city's only tea salons. Today, as the ubiquitous mint green bags around town attest, it's the most popular. With magnificent belle époque styling, the salon de thé owes a great deal of its following to the macaron, the pretty meringue biscuit that is as iconic to the French as the koeksister is to South Africans. But there are dozens of other douceurs to bite into, including religieuse cakes - cream-filled puff pastry painted with pastel-coloured glaze - and the bakery's own interpretation of the cupcake - in French flavours, such as blackcurrant-violet. 16 Rue Royale

LA PÂTISSERIE DES RÊVES

7TH ARRONDISSEMENT

Against a candy-coloured backdrop of pink, green and tangerine, glass domes descend from the ceiling, each protecting an individual cake that's displayed on a central table like fine art. Owner Philippe Conticini takes dazzling liberties with traditional French desserts. The éclairs, for example, are enrobed in tubes of dark chocolate, while the rectangular Saint-Honoré cake has swirling ribbons of crème Chantilly. Of all the avant-garde creations, don't miss the Paris-Brest, a ring of pastry piped full of hazelnut cream and liquid praline. 93 Rue du Bac

STOHRER 2ND ARRONDISSEMENT

Step across 'Stohrer' scrolled in gold on the turquoise-tiled floor of this patisserie on the Rue Montorgueil, and reverse time - it was founded in 1730 by Nicholas Stohrer, King Louis XV's pastry chef. Leave the historic patisserie with almost any French classic, from raspberry tarts with perfectly aligned berries dusted with sugar to vanilla-filled Puit d'Amour cake. 51 Rue Montorqueil

PIERRE HERMÉ 6TH ARRONDISSEMENT Visit this original Saint-Germain boutique and look beyond the Technicolour macarons - in

flavours like lime and ginger - and admire the rows of gateaux behind a long glass partition. Decorated with shards of chocolate, rose petals or cherries, the cakes are almost too pretty to eat. But - as is the case with the Plénitude Individuel, a dark chocolate cake filled with chocolate mousse accented with salted caramel - it would be a crime not to. 72 Rue Bonaparte

BLÉ SUCRÉ 12TH ARRONDISSEMENT

After stints as pastry chef at the acclaimed Bristol and Plaza Athénée hotels, Fabrice Le Bourdat went to the residential 12th Arrondissement to open a small patisserie with his wife. The modest size belies Le Bourdat's expertise and the massive selection of pastries, cakes and breads. Many Parisians insist his flaky pains au chocolat are the best in the city, and his classic madeleines take top honours. Moist and airy sponge cakes, with a crackling layer of orange icing, madeleines are sweetly satisfying - especially when enjoyed across the street under the trees of Square Trousseau. 7 Rue Antoine Vollon

- Amy M Thomas

GREEK MEZE

Authentic Mediterranean flavours

Sun-soaked Greek life swirls around meze, a kind of tasting menu that dates to ancient times. These three places deliver Greece on an authentic level.

VLASSIS ATHENS

Vlassis is in Athens' chaotic concrete jungle. Join locals crowded into this no-fuss jumble of tables and pick from an array of 20 or more dishes such as tirokafteri, a spicy whipped feta dip and gigantes, beans baked in a light tomato sauce. Don't be surprised if people invite you home to meet their families and eat some more. 15 Maiandrou, Ilisia

MILIA CRETE

Old Crete thrives in the mountains at Milia. a hotel and restaurant in an abandoned stone village restored by two locals who serve meze prepped from their own organic garden. Sample the lamb keftedes, bite-size meatballs seasoned with mint and fresh origanum, and dakos, a Cretan speciality of crushed tomatoes and tangy goat's cheese served on wholegrain rusks. Milia Mountain Retreat, Vlatos

CHILIOMODI SKALA, PATMOS

Some of the finest meze is on the island of Patmos, where St John is said to have holed up in a cave to pen the Book of Revelation. Most visitors clock Patmos as a day stop, but linger here to discover Greece at its simplest and most charming - smooth pebble beaches and whitewashed villages. Natives feast on meze at Chiliomodi in Skala. Order grilled, fresh octopus in lemon and olive oil. Second street to the left off the road leading to Chora, Skala

- Costas Christ

NAPLES' PIZZERIAS

Sample the perfect pizza Purists can pay homage to the understated Neapolitan pie at these three pizzerias.

L'ANTICA PIZZERIA DA MICHELE

Dating to 1870 and sticking firmly to old-school rules, Da Michele still pulls only two kinds of pizza out of its oak-burning oven, and both are models of restraint. The Marinara is topped with locally grown tomatoes, garlic, origanum and extra-virgin olive oil. The second is the Margherita, named for the 19th-century Italian queen Margherita who visited town in 1889. Its toppings - red tomato, white cow's milk fiordi latte mozzarella and green basil - mimic the colours of the Italian flag. 1 Via Cesare Sersale

PIZZARIA TRIANON DA CIRO

Across the street from Da Michele, Trianon De Ciro is less touristy and isn't afraid to add ingredients to the basics. You have the choice of Italian sausage on your Trianon pie and can sample up to eight different toppings on the Gran Trianon pizza, including local ingredients like artichokes, olives and friarielli, a regional broccoli cousin, that is fried with garlic and pepper flakes. 44/46 Via Pietro Colletta

DI MATTEO

Featuring familiar pizzeria touchstones, including a view of pizza makers sliding pies out of the oven with long wooden paddles. Di Matteo lures diners with its pizza fritta. Stuffed with ricotta, provola (a smoked cheese) and a smear of pork fat, the deep-fried masterwork is a melted blend of blistered crust and bubbling cheese - just enough to keep Naples' pizza devotees returning.

94 Via dei Tribunali

- Raphael Kadushin

NEW CHEESE CAPITALS

Three unusual destinations Outside the dairy trinity of France, Switzerland and Italy lies compelling competition - lands of milk and honey that promise new tastes in new places.

WALES

Farm-made caws (cheese) embodies the fiercely independent spirit of this ancient culture. Caerffili (or Caerphilly) - a crumbly yet flavourful cheese that miners ate to replenish salt lost through perspiration in the coal pits - provides a savoury Welsh response to ubiquitous English cheddar. Be sure to visit the Big Pit Museum in Blaenafon; the Blaenafon Cheddar Company uses the former mines to age its cheeses, including varieties washed in Welsh Penderyn whisky. In Carmarthenshire, Caws Cenarth Cheese produces the award-winning Golden Cenarth cheese and has a visitors centre. Annually in September, Cardiff hosts the Great British Cheese Festival featuring some 450 cheeses.

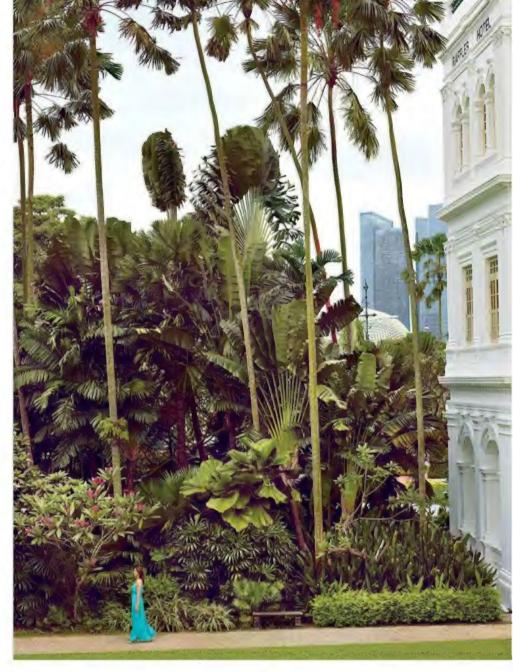
TASMANIA

Australia's wild island is home to national brands such as King Island Dairy, whose Bass Strait Blue delivers a subtle bite. Take a ferry to isolated King Island, where dairy cows outnumber humans four to one. Bruny Island Cheese Company also resides offshore on bird-rich Bruny Island. Its one-day-old cow's milk cheese is best eaten onsite. On the main island, visit Ashgrove Cheese, where smooth handmade cheeses are infused with local flavours such as Tasmanian lavender and wild bush tomato.

ICELAND

This northern country takes immense pride in its 1 100-year-old breed of grass-fed cows that produce a rich, earthy milk. Common Icelandic cheeses are hard and Gouda-like, but artisanal varieties show star qualities. Stori Dimon stands out as a delicate and creamy rinded cheese with a faint blue vein. It goes well with water crackers and Icelandic blueberry jam. After a taste, hike to the mountain for which the cheese is named - Stori Dimon is a sleepy, snow-covered volcano in south Iceland.

- Andrew Evans





HAVE A SIP ABOVE Head to the Long Bar at Raffles **Hotel for a Singapore Sling** LEFT El Fishawy in Cairo has served mint tea for over two centuries

'guests milk goats, forage for some of the island's 70 edible greens and herbs, and dip into mineral springs in Lefkada'





CLASSIC CAFÉS

Top spots around the world

Buzzing on a caffeinated current, espresso shops and tea spots present spaces that provide the warmth of home and the stimulation of society. To amble into a classic café is to achieve a local perspective on life.

CENTRAL KAVEHAZ BUDAPEST. HUNGARY This elegant escape from Budapest's bustle has hummed along since 1887 as an intellectual centre (barring stints as a paprika market, disco and arcade). A large writers' table in the early 20th century, counting such national notables as Jozsef Kiss, Mihály Babits and poet Geza Gyóni as regulars. Writers are still celebrated under the café's high ceilings, brass fixtures and grand windows. Bring a book, sip a frothy cappuccino and nibble on confections such as cseresznyes joghurtos piskota - a tart cherry-yoghurt sponge cake.

LONG BAR, RAFFLES HOTEL SINGAPORE Ceiling fans, rattan chairs and cocktails recreate the sensations of a Malaysian plantation at this two-storey retreat from the heat. The Singapore sling (gin, cherry brandy, fresh pineapple juice and a variety of other spirits) was invented here by bartender Ngiam Tong Boon around 1910, but the most famous names are those of the writers who have graced these low tables and stepped over thousands of empty peanut shells. Ernest Hemingway, Rudyard Kipling and W Somerset Maugham each spent hours here, sweating out the noonday sun and dreaming up their spirited fictions.

EL FISHAWY COFFEE SHOP CAIRO, EGYPT For more than two centuries, this smoky, mirrored café has been an inviting respite within the labyrinthine tangle of the 14th-century Khan el Khalili bazaar. Beneath chequered archways and tin lamps, wobbly brass-topped tables teeter under the traffic of steaming glasses of mint tea, dark coffee and apricot-flavoured shisha tobacco from hookah pipes. In this hazy atmosphere, Nobel Prize-winning writer Naguib Mahfouz sipped his way to inspiration.

LE PROCOPE PARIS, FRANCE

What do Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and the Lost Generation have in common? They were coffee lushes with a fierce veneration of Left Bank cafés. The genre-defining coffeehouses of the Sixth

Arrondissement - from Hemingway's Les Deux Magots to Apollinaire's La Closerie des Lilas trace their roots to Le Procope, Paris's oldest café. Founded in 1686. Le Procope hummed with the brainpower of Voltaire. Ben Franklin and Victor Hugo.

CAFÉ TORTONI BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA Since opening in 1858, Argentina's oldest café has been a hotbed of culture that merges a Parisian aesthetic with an Argentine intellectualism. Launched by a Frenchman to recall the elegant coffeehouses of his homeland, Café Tortoni is an amber-lit gallery of ceiling-high columns, stained-glass panels and marble tables. BA-born writer Jorge Luis Borges frequented this café; Albert Einstein ate alfajores (dulce de leche cookies) here. A basement stage hosts jazz jams, tango shows and poetry readings.

KATHMANDU GUEST HOUSE KATHMANDU.

This budget hotel and backpacker mecca in the Thamel tourist district witnessed a Beatles invasion in the late 1960s, when the Fab Four made their subcontinental meditation circuit. While the guesthouse itself is a bit rough around the edges, its breezy garden retains some meditative powers, enhanced by hot, healing masala chai - sweetened tea spiced with cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, fennel seeds and ginger and creamed with milk.

LAI JIN YU XUAN TEAHOUSE BEIJING, CHINA The humble teahouse assumes an imperial role at this historic spot in Zhongshan Park, southwest of the Forbidden City. Enclosed by flowering gardens and willow trees, it was frequented by Chinese writer Lu Xun - the founder of modern Chinese literature, who held salons here in the 1920s. Today, the ornate red hideaway offers a tranquil break from the cacophony of Beijing's streets. The café's formal counterpart is a luxe restaurant serving a menu based on banquet dishes inspired by the 18thcentury classic The Dream of the Red Chamber.

ANTICO CAFFÈ GRECO ROME, ITALY Marble tables, upholstered chairs, gold and crimson damask walls, jacketed waiters and countless mirrors reflect an age of elegance that's remained suspended in time since 1760 in this classic café on Via Condotti near the Spanish Steps. Decades of travellers have made this a must-stop, where the caffé macchiato is molto delizioso. But what else did you expect? Goethe, Byron, Berlioz, Dickens, Keats and Mark Twain were a discriminating lot - and each of them whiled away the hours in one of the oldest coffeehouses in the Eternal City.

COFFEEHOUSE AT COLLEGE STREET

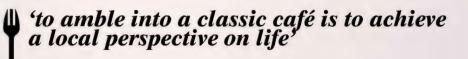
KOLKATA, INDIA

Generations of writers, artists and scholars have turned this caffeinated space near the University of Calcutta into a home base for intellectual exchange. Political and cultural movements gathered steam in this barebones café, which opened in 1942, as Iuminaries such as Bengali Renaissance man Rabindranath Tagore, filmmaker Satyajit Ray and singer Manna Dey fuelled their intellects here. Today, the small café still simmers with college students and a variety of coffees.

CAFÉ CENTRAL VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky brewed up big ideas beneath the vaulted ceiling of Vienna's central gathering place. Great Austrians, from Sigmund Freud to architect Adolf Loos and modernist poet Peter Altenberg, energised their ideas with a steady diet of coffee and apfelstrudel at this landmark café, which was opened in 1876 and glimmers today with gilded columns and a glowing pastry display that includes Linzer, Esterhazy and Sacher tortes.

- George W Stone













FOOD AND CULTURE MEET
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Cooking courses at
Castello di Vicarello in Tuscany give you
the inside track on Mediterranean fare;
get a taste for your destination with
local favourites like hot chocolate and
pastries; Malbec grapes near La Posada
de Bodega Vistalba, Argentina; do
a Cook's Tour in Charroux in France
to learn how to produce delectable
'brasserie luxe' fare; even Freud sipped
coffee at Vienna's Café Central, still
a gathering point today



VINEYARD VISITS

Five of the best global wine routes

In wine regions around the globe, passionate innkeepers have opened retreats among vineyards. Guests soak up the terroir during wine-paired meals, vineyard tours and tastings.

BELTANE RANCH SONOMA VALLEY. **CALIFORNIA**

Glen Ellen is the idvllic setting of this historic Victorian-style ranch house with wraparound porches and views of the gardens, orchards and vineyards. Each of the five sizable rooms features a private door to the front porch, where guests can enjoy locavore breakfasts of frittatas prepared with homegrown veggies, eggs laid by the ranch's hens and fresh jams from fruit picked on-site. The fourth-generation owners loan out rackets and tennis balls for those who want to volley on the property's court and offer tips on visiting nearby wineries. Take home a bottle of their lively, fruity 2010 Sauvignon Blanc. Doubles from R1 454; www.beltaneranch.com

QUINTA DO VALLADO DOURO VALLEY, PORTUGAL

Perched on a hill surrounded by vines in every direction and overlooking the Corgo River, the 18th-century Quinta do Vallado has been converted from a family home into a comfy inn complete with swimming pool and tasting room. Five guest rooms are furnished in unfussy country style with vintage headboards, crisp white linens and colourful hand-woven rugs. Sixth-generation owner and winemaker João Ferreira Álvares Ribeiro will arrange a sunset picnic, paired with a bottle of his estate's young reds, on the property's highest point. He can also organise a boat trip on the Douro or a bike to explore the region. From R1 200; www.quintadovallado.com

LES SOURCES DE CAUDALIE BORDEAUX, FRANCE

The 49 rooms and suites at this charming Bordeaux property overlook a vineyard on one side and pond on the other. Sailboat photographs and maritime objets d'art hang on lavender or lemon-yellow walls, while weathered wooden chests sit at the foot of downy beds. Chef Nicholas Masse presides over Michelin-starred La Grand' Vigne, where he transforms the freshest local fish and

produce into tantalising traditional dishes. Time your visit around his cooking classes, held twice a month. Wine classes take place in the hotel's tasting tower, where the sommelier pours smooth white and red wines from the renowned Graves region of Bordeaux. End your visit with a red vine leaf bath (considered to improve circulation) at Spa Vinotherapie. From R4 000: www.sources-caudalie.com

LA POSADA DE BODEGA VISTALBA MENDOZA, ARGENTINA

In the foothills of the Andes, the Carlos Pulenta winery, known for its delicious Malbec, runs an inn of just two rooms with private balconies overlooking the vineyard or the majestic mountain range. Days begin with a breakfast of homemade marmalade, medialunas (flaky croissants) and fresh juice served in a room with exposed beams and leather and wood furnishings in earthy Andean hues. Stroll among the 60-yearold vines solo or with a guide and then attend a wine tasting in the bodega. Come lunchtime, four-course meals pair with Pulenta wines at La Bourgogne, arguably Mendoza's best restaurant. The amiable staff can arrange horseback rides, hikes and visits to neighbouring wineries. From R3 057; www.bodegamounier.com

MOOROOROO PARK

BAROSSA VALLEY, AUSTRALIA

Shiraz vines, 300-year-old red gum trees, intimate rose-scented courtyards and gurgling fountains set the scene at this South Australia property, where historic stone buildings from the 1840s have been transformed into Jacobs Creek Retreat, with seven handsome guest suites. A few of the rooms are decorated in silk, velvet, and dark wood, and others have separate sitting rooms or loft bedrooms. Visit the on-site stone Cellar Door tasting house to sample sparkling Shiraz, Moscato and other artisan wine blends from the Barossa Valley, or learn the process of traditional sausage-making in the cooking school. From R3 192; www.jacobscreekretreat.com.au - Celeste Moure

COOK

COOKING SCHOOLS

Lessons in good living

Tap into the good living and convivial feasting that are integral to the Mediterranean way of life at one of these authentic cooking schools.

IKARÍA GREECE

Diane Kochilas hosts culinary workshops at her ancestral home on Ikaría. Learn how to cook dishes like octopus with fennel, orange and olives and kid goat roasted in a wood-burning oven, or immerse yourself in local traditions on the weeklong Glorious Greek Cooking courses. Forage for some of the island's 70 edible greens and dip into mineral springs in Lefkada, renowned for their therapeutic qualities since the age of Hippocrates. www.dianekochilas.com

NABIYE KONAK ULA, TURKEY

TV chef Engin Akin also writes about the culinary crossover between Greece and Turkey. Enjoy her irrepressible hospitality at her farmhouse in Ula, a village near the Aegean coast. Learn the rich history of Ottoman dishes while preparing dolmas, meatballs with pistachios and tahini sauce and manti (meat dumplings in yoghurt). Day trips include a visit to the bakery to make otlu borek (greens-stuffed pastry) and a meze feast aboard a yacht. www.enginakin.com

CHARROUX AUVERGNE, FRANCE

Marlene van der Westhuizen's Cook's Tours happen four times a year between May and October in this glorious 12th-century heritage village close to Burgundy. Learn the finer details of producing 'brasserie luxe' fare at these workshops that make the most of the historic food markets and great wines this region is famous for. www.goodfoodco.co.za

CASTELLO DI VICARELLO TUSCANY ITALY

Aurora Baccheschi Berti's cookbook, My Tuscan Kitchen, showcases what Italy does best: simple dishes using the freshest ingredients. Try out these recipes in her kitchen in Castello di Vicarello, a 12th-century castle in the Tuscan hills near Siena, where ingredients are handpicked from the organic garden. The estate provides wild boar and pheasant, and the vineyard produces award-winning reds. www.vicarello.it

- Rachel Howard



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the best short trips in the world

LONG WEEKEND



THE SPIRIT OF FRANCE

CELEBRATE JOAN OF ARC'S 600TH BIRTHDAY WITH FINESSE – ONE CHAMPAGNE TOAST AT A TIME

WORDS DON GEORGE

IN HISTORY BOOKS, JOAN OF ARC'S STORY concludes with the 19-year-old bound to a stake – forced into a dress, clutching a cross and gazing heavenward, flames leaping around her bare feet. But in France, the 'virgin warrior' prevails, a unifying icon who charged onto the battlefield to rescue the French monarchy during the Hundred Years' War against the British. Indeed, her convictions secured her undoing as well as her immortality. Joan would have turned 600 in 2012, an achievement that inspired a drive through northeast France to trace the route of her early triumphs – from the village where angels' voices summoned her to the grand city where she stood by as Charles VII took the crown. Luckily for us, Joan also journeyed through what is now Champagne country.

This pilgrimage trailing the path of St Jeanne d'Arc starts with a two and a half hours' drive from Reims, a short train ride from Paris or Charles de Gaulle airport. Verdant pastures, forested hillsides and meandering rivers lead to Domrémy-la-Pucelle, the 150-person hamlet where Joan's childhood home still stands. The daughter of a farmer, Joan had an unexceptional childhood, but she was considered especially pious.

At 13, Joan began hearing celestial voices that would later instruct her to drive the British out of her homeland. At the end of her life, while on trial for heresy, she testified, 'I heard a voice from God...about midday, in summer time, in my father's garden... from the right side toward the church.' The garden has changed since Joan's time, but the Church of St Rémy, where she was baptised, is a few steps from the farmhouse. Over the next few years, the voices continued, eventually compelling Joan to leave home and travel more than 640 kilometres to the Loire Valley to meet with Charles VII. After convincing him of her purity, Joan (clad in male attire) led an attack on the British troops in Orléans. Her courage rallied the French soldiers to a pivotal victory that was followed by a string of successes, including the taking of Troyes, the ancient capital of Champagne.

Continue your mission on a two-hour drive west to Troyes. The town's importance harks back to Roman times, when it was a trading hub on the Via Agrippa connecting Milan, Italy, to Boulognesur-Mer, France. In the 12th century, merchants from across Europe flocked here to sell wool and silk textiles, leather, fur, silverware and spices at its twice-a-vear trade fairs. The mercantile spirit still thrives, with Troyes remaining a centre of French knitwear - the Lacoste sportswear empire was founded here in 1933, and it's the contemporary capital of factory outlet shops. Troyes is a beguiling mix of ancient and modern, most evident in its old town of half-timbered houses from the 16th century awash in russet, lemon and persimmon tones, flowered squares and courtvards, and cobbled alleyways, such as the Ruelle des Chats, over which the buildings lean gently toward each other.

Two sites particularly manifest Troves's interweaving of the old and new: the Maison de l'Outil et de la Pensée Ouvrière (literally, 'house of tools and workers' thinking') lovingly renders homage to carpenters, wheelwrights, shoemakers, and other craftsmen with displays of 10 000 hand tools from past centuries, each designed to accomplish a specific task. Conversely, the brickfacade Bishop's Palace is now the site of the Musée d'Art Moderne, a showcase for the gift of local hosiery manufacturers turned art collectors Pierre and Denise Lévy. Their enlightening ensemble suggests Joan of Arc isn't the only maverick to be celebrated in the region, with avant-garde works by artists such as Dufy, Rouault and Picasso. Emphasis goes to the Fauves (literally, 'the wild beasts'), including André Derain's electric blue 'Big Ben'.

After taking Troyes, Joan marched straight to Reims, but a slight detour northwest celebrates another symbol of French heritage: sparkling wine. The road traverses peaceful Champagne-Ardenne countryside - vine-latticed fields and crops, the sinuous Seine glinting in the distance, a few redroofed stone homes punctuating the landscape.

At Sézanne, the Côte des Blancs Champagne trail flows north to Épernay. The historic brick palace of Moët & Chandon is a must-visit. Founded in 1743, Épernay's oldest and largest Champagne house holds court along with eight other Champagneries on the Avenue de Champagne. Here Jean-Rémy Moët entertained Napoleon and his entourage in royal style in the early 19th century. Pass under a chandelier made of Champagne flutes and into the chalky cellars for a heady immersion among thousands of bottles filling the cool catacombs. Before moving on to this drive's final stop, the glorious city of Reims, buy some bubbly to fête the climax of Joan's - and your - quest.

In Reims, head directly to the Palais du Tau, located next to the grand cathedral (together a UNESCO World Heritage site). The palace's gilded treasures include regalia used in the coronation of Charles X in 1825, including a replica of the 'holy flask'. According to legend, the vial came from God, delivered by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and held the sacred oil used to anoint French kings since the year 496.

You could spend days exploring Reims's riches, but any Joan of Arc odyssey should culminate in the magnificent 801-year-old cathedral. Here on 17 July 1429, the archbishop of Reims tipped the holy flask to anoint the head of the dauphin (or heir apparent), and he and five other bishops solemnly placed the crown on King Charles VII, with Joan at his side. Standing in that vast, hushed space, transfixed in stained-glass sunlight, one of those windows now depicting the maid herself, you can imagine the pomp and pageantry - and perhaps understand why, six centuries on, this bold heroine still captivates the collective imagination of the French, and the world.

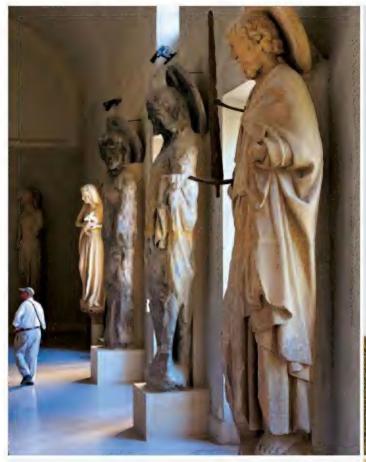
EXPLORE

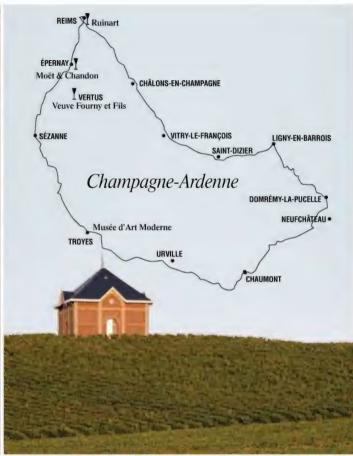
First produced in the 17th century. sparkling wine fizzed into fashion in France after 1715 when the new regent, the Duc d'Orléans, began pouring it at Palais-Royal dinners. Since 1927, the Champagne appellation has been legally restricted to specific plots situated in five districts within the Champagne-Ardenne region in northeast France. where regulations for growing, harvesting, pressing, bottling and aging are scrupulously enforced. Five rambling Champagne routes traverse these districts. (Radiating around Reims and Épernay are Massif de St-Thierry, Montagne de Reims, Vallée de la Marne, and Côte des Blancs. Côte des Bar is east of Troyes.) Visit classic houses that produce acclaimed prestige cuvées, such as the historic Champagne Salon in the village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger.

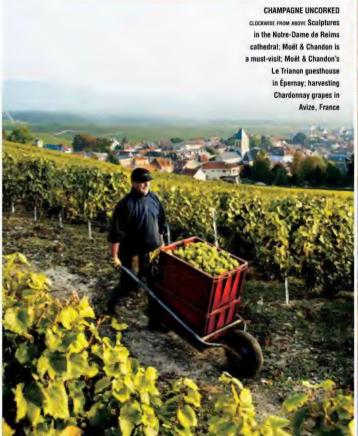
EAT

Theatre and cuisine pair deliciously at Café du Palais, a two-minute walk from Reims's Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The Art Deco styling of the 82-year-old café, including a glass roof signed by artist Jacques Simon, sets a buoyant scene for feasting on specialities such as Reims ham. Champenoise potée (stew) and rich and creamy cheeses from the nearby villages of Chaource and Langres. To wash it down? Champagne, of course. SLEEP

In Troyes, the meticulously restored Maison de Rhodes envelops guests in history. The half-timbered inn hosted the Knights Templar in the 12th century; today its 11 idiosyncratic rooms marry original flagstones and immense hearths with spacious baths and tiled showers. Guests breakfast in the enclosed courtvard beside a lush lawn and garden; chef-and-waiter René Hachez serves boeuf bourguignonne in the candlelit dining room for dinner. From R2 100 per night for a double room: www. maisonderhodes.com













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MADIKWE LONG WEEKEND





When does a child start forming lasting memories? Some say not before 18 months, others think much later. It's hard to believe our boy of 15 months, silent and relaxed for the first time in hours, will not remember what he's seeing here for the first time. We've been on the road from OR Tambo International Airport in Joburg for well over four hours. The last stretch is on a bumpy road with red dust billowing around the juddering rental car. Now we are in Madikwe. The sun is setting, all has gone quiet and the dust settles softly. The only sounds are of branches and bark tearing, twigs and bush snapping under heavy feet. We come over a hill right into the middle of an elephant herd: two bulls, a few cows and a tiny calf. On the other side of the car, an irate teen is shattering the silence by trumpeting and flapping his ears. We're blocking his path ... we drive off slowly.

A few hundred metres further we're met by Paul Slyer, our guide, and assistant manager Julia Castellan. We walk unsteadily over a hanging bridge to the main lounge of Jaci's Safari Lodge. The owners call it a family-friendly place. It had better be. We're the only guests during our midweek stay, so we won't see the relaxed and friendly staff under real pressure. But our blue-eyed wonder, who we discover later has a middle-ear infection, puts them through their paces. Best we have the first night's dinner in our room, which is no problem for the staff.

Our freestanding chalet has a thatched roof, low stone walls, canvas panels that roll up, basic necessities, quirky African design elements and an alfresco shower. Lying on the bed, we can see a stream flowing about 10 metres away, behind a fence keeping out the larger animals. Just before sunset the elephants amble down for a mud bath and a drink right in front of us. Do they remember the boy gazing at them from the

a river runs through it: the beloved Marico of writer Herman Charles Bosman. Jaci and Jan van Heteren, who raised their three kids here while setting up the two lodges, like to say they concentrate on the Big Ten, adding to the list hippo, giraffe, both brown and spotted hyena, cheetah and the new tourist favourite, wild dog. Madikwe has two packs of this endangered species. Paul explains the wild dog craze. It's because they are rare, pulled back from the brink of extinction. 'And they do more,' he adds drily. Wild dogs are fearless and lively. They are organised, intelligent hunters and it's thrilling to see them in action. A guide from another lodge radios in news of a wild dog kill. Two dogs have brought down a buck and left to fetch the rest of the pack. We drive to the spot and wait at the fresh carcass until we have to go back. Duty calls: it's bath and bedtime for the little one.

Jaci's has many family-friendly offerings. Two family suites, one facing the Marico and the other the stream, sleep six to eight and each has a private plunge pool, a personal guide and game drive vehicle. There is a spacious playroom, a short game drive for kids under four and a cute activity booklet for older kids joining their parents on the longer trips. Children have an early supper, prepared by chefs who bend over backwards to please finicky young guests. Minders look after the kids while the adults have dinner in the main lounge, relaxing afterwards in its loft bar where WiFi is available as well.

As our eyes become more adept at seeing camouflaged animals, we realise Madikwe offers more than 66 mammal species. There are flashes of bright red, blue and yellow against the dusky palette of the bush. These are birds with names as colourful as their bright plumage: crimson-breasted shrike, lilac-breasted roller, violet-eared

Every bird call and rumbling elephant sound travels far through the mild night air

porch? They come every day while we are there – as do two warthogs, scuttling down the bank at around noon for their refreshments.

In the dark every bird call and rumbling elephant sound travels far through the mild night air. The next morning petal-shaped tracks show that small deer trotted through the grounds during the night. The day starts with a light breakfast and a three-hour game drive. A minder with the patience of a saint looks after our boy as Paul takes us down a bumpy track into the dry veld.

Outside the lodges, most of Madikwe is unfenced and all guides are in constant radio contact, telling one another when they've found something worth seeing. This is a big bonus, since the reserve is a good 75 000 hectares in extent with 150 kilometres of electrified fencing around the perimeter. There is an ecological feel-good story behind Madikwe: in the '90s a feasibility study showed that wildlife tourism was the best option for this poor and remote but malariafree area. Land was bought from struggling subsistence farmers and consolidated into a park. Leases were granted for lodges in the reserve and most of the created jobs went to locals. The reserve is run as a joint venture by the North West Parks and Tourism Board, private investors and local communities. Then came Project Phoenix, at the time the largest of its kind in the world, repopulating the reserve with animals that would normally be found in this habitat, halfway between Lowveld bush and Kalahari plains. It is dotted with volcanic inselbergs, bordered in the south by the Dwarsberg mountains. And

waxbill, shaft-tailed whydah. When the migrants return in summer, Madikwe has more than 360 bird species. They flock to the swamp through which water from the lodge's ecofriendly recycling system filters back into the river. Right next to it is a viewing post where intrepid birdwatchers can even spend the night. The landscape is dotted with tall, skeletal trees: the protected leadwood, one of Africa's tallest. It can live up to 1 000 years and remains standing for decades after dying, thanks to wood so dense that it sinks in water and can withstand any borer beetle.

The closer you look, the more you see, and Paul is an enthusiastic guide who can make anything seem interesting. He stops at a bare patch littered with dung and explains what can be learned from each pile. Most fascinating are balls the size of oranges – the dung beetle's art. At the entrance to Madikwe a sign reads: 'Beware: you are entering Big Five territory.' On a side road another warns: 'Drive slowly. Chameleons crossing.' From the largest land mammal to the smallest insect, Madikwe is a place of wonder. It is pure nature, and Jaci's Safari Lodge places your family comfortably and safely in the heart of it all.

From R4 495 per person sharing per night, including meals, two game activities per day, 'jungle drives' for children four years and younger, as well as childminding during the evening meal and while parents are on game drives in the morning and evening; www.madikwe.com

GETTING THERE By air Madikwe Air operates a daily shuttle service from the Federal Air Executive Lounge at OR Tambo Airport, Joburg, to Madikwe Game Reserve. Returns from R4 075 (adults) and R3 365 (children); www.madikwegamereserve.net/madikwe-game-reserve/madikwe-air-shuttle.php. By road Jaci's Lodge can arrange road transfers, or you can drive to Madikwe, which is 28km from Gaborone Airport in Botswana and 360km from Johannesburg.

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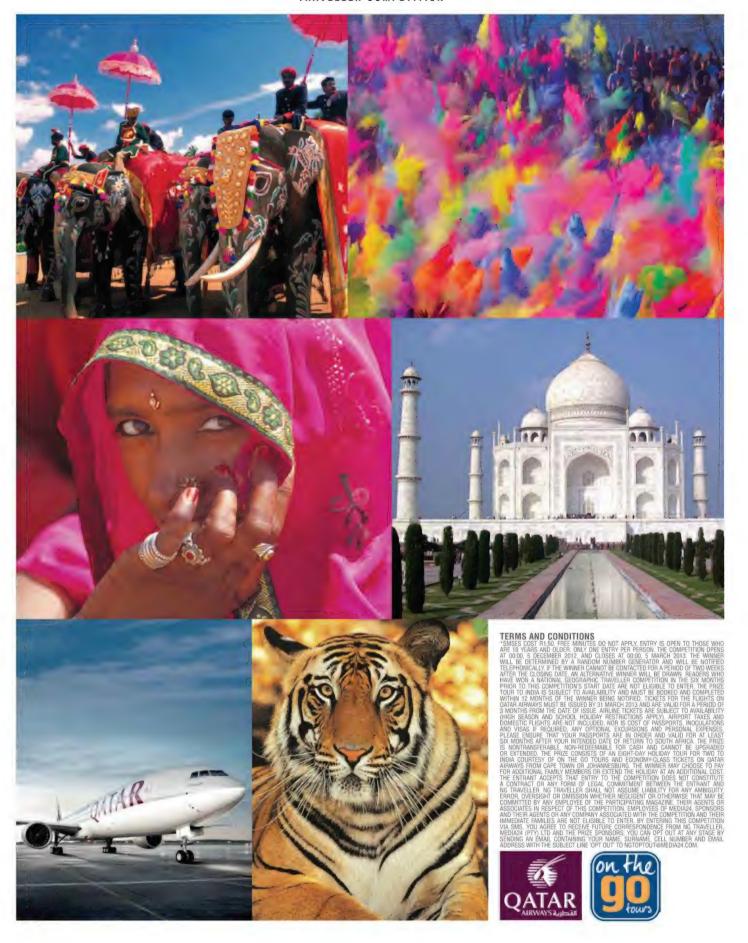
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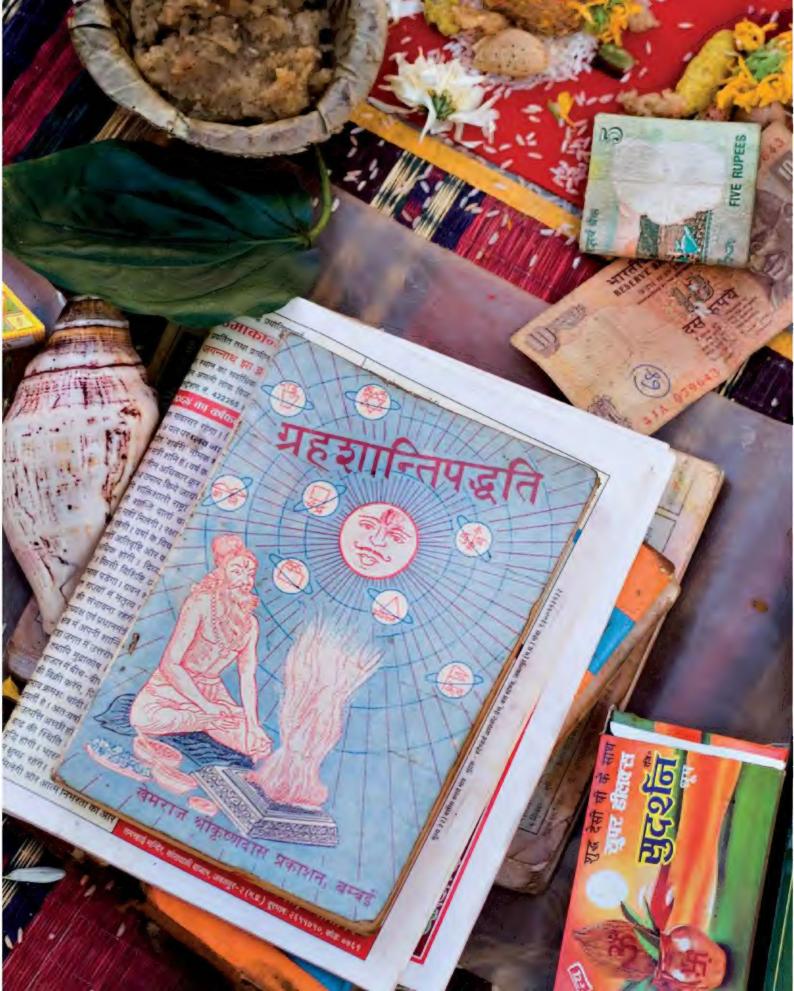


TRAVELLER COMPETITION









High above the silvery flow of the Ganges River, on a swaying suspension bridge, I realise how far I've strayed from my quest. The metronome sound of a Royal Enfield motorcycle ticking beneath my legs is the giveaway. I had come to the remote town of Rishikesh, India – a gateway to the Himalayas – with a vision of deep silence and lots of focused yoga. Yet something, karmic vibrations perhaps, lured me astray.

Rishikesh is a shopping mall for spirituality straddling the Ganges northeast of New Delhi. For those seeking enlightenment or adventurous escape – hippies, spiritual tourists, religious pilgrims, river rats – the healing power of the Ganges is a strong magnet, attracting hundreds of thousands each year. As a result, Rishikesh and its neighbouring big brother, Haridwar, are hot spots teeming with ashrams, yoga schools, white-water rafting companies and vegan restaurants (by law, the region is vegetarian and alcohol free).

In 1968, the Beatles came to this corner of India to study transcendental meditation. Ringo left early, but John, Paul and George stayed for weeks at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram – and wrote some 40 songs. I hadn't come to write music, but to return an ailing back.

My years of sports, paired now with the immutable milestones of ageing, had resulted in a persistent, jarring pain in my lower spine. An x-ray revealed what looked to be a photo of Jenga – that woodenblock tower game. According to my doctor, the condition is relatively common. But if I didn't stabilise the area with core-strength exercises and stretching, I would be forced to have my lower spine fused – surgery, metal rods. Yoga, I was told, could help. Enter Rishikesh, world capital of yoga. I'd put my beef-eating and coffee- and wine-guzzling habits on hold to embrace the ashram lifestyle in its motherland. I set off to find my inner *om*. What did I have to lose? Back surgery, for starters.

The distracting rumble of a motorcycle was not part of the yoga retuning. However, I told myself, the siren song of a classic British bike (built in India) wouldn't put me entirely off my quest. Motoring in second gear, I glide through dense traffic on the swaying suspension bridge. Pedestrians – some barefoot, others ornate with

painted sandals and jewelled toes beneath softly swishing wraps – whisper as I weave past and around the wheeled and hoofed traffic of mopeds and sacred cows clattering across the span. There is such spatial awareness that cow horns and handlebars on vehicles coming from opposite directions occasionally touch yet avoid entanglement. Rhesus monkeys, hanging from steel cables above, study every move of every passerby, looking to snatch food and shiny objects.

I head down an alley and turn into the back courtyard of Parmarth Niketan Ashram. I've been in residence here for three days and am in the groove – feeling squarely centred in the present moment. I'd chosen Parmarth because it is less strict than other ashrams, allowing guests to come and go. Just be back before curfew. I was also impressed by its mission to offer free medical care to those in dire need. In addition, it supports maybe 200 boys – some orphaned – called Rishikumar, providing housing, food, basic education and spiritual teachings.

At 6.50am the next day I sit in a simple room with a wooden floor, white walls and poster-size black-and-white photos of Pujya Swamiji smiling down on our group of students. Named 1991's Hindu of the Year by *Hinduism Today* magazine, Pujya Swamiji left home at age eight to study in the Himalayas. Today he is the spiritual head of Parmarth and though he doesn't teach, he occasionally is on the scene in the evening. As I listen to my yoga teacher, I work on a breathing technique that involves inhaling and exhaling through one nostril at a time.

Patience. Breathe.

I move into the upright mountain pose and focus on absences. There are no New Age tunes pumping through hidden speakers, no distracting yoga outfits, no blinding heat, no incense and no attitude. Just students and a teacher. I tackle the postures wearing a down jacket



and long pants. In December, the mornings here are frigid, I miss the music initially but quickly become aware of the Himalayan rhythms all around us: the scurrying of monkeys on the roof and the clanking of the studio's wooden shutters by glacial wind gusts.

I embrace my first off-the-mat yogi test – eating. With little choice, my appetite submits to the Vedic diet of alkaline foods; lentils, rice, cooked veggies, spices. I quickly grow fond of the code of silence during mealtime. The coffee withdrawal, at first, is cruel. The other hurdle is eating cross-legged on a marble floor. My hips detest it. Low tables are a luxury offered mostly for Westerners. They provide little comfort. A regular ashram visitor from Brazil points out how horridly fast I eat. 'I used to eat like you; fast as I could to get to something else.'

'I know, my tapeworm is quite active,' I say, smiling. He doesn't laugh. 'Actually, I'm trying to finish my meal before my hip or knee dislocates from contorting to fit to this marble floor.'

'Yes, just remember, your digestion is not in a hurry.'

I felt an urge to remind him about that code of silence at mealtime. Patience. Breathe.

I drift through a pattern of waking to the ashram's 5am meditative mantra chants, attending cold yoga classes before breakfast and eating meals in silence (slightly more slowly). I also begin leaving the ashram on exploratory sorties around Rishikesh and neighbouring Haridwar.

It's beyond the ashram that I discover my secret meditation weapon: the Royal Enfield motorcycle. I'd connected with its source, a man of leaves as a white statue of Shiva, the all-powerful Hindu yogi deity, looks on. Despite such blissful days, I find myself anxiously wondering if the voga classes would become more challenging, if I would learn some spine-curing contortions. Not once had I even broken a sweat in class, despite my down jacket. Was I missing something? My back ached.

Patience. Breathe.

When I bump into Madhay, who continues to help me navigate the area, steering me to the best cup of masala chai or the freshest belly-safe salad (Ramana's Garden), I express my concerns about my therapy. 'Peter, remember, yoga is more about the mind than the body.' He pauses. 'And don't worry so much,' he says with an easy, toothy grin, his perfectly shaved head almost glowing as he smiles. 'Worry is praying for what you don't want.'

After a week, I leave camp and motor up the Ganges, winding past candy-striped buses and overstuffed rickshaws belching black clouds. Madhav had said that the Ganges's power strengthens farther upstream, an area where cave dwellings are not unusual. Snaking north, I pass bands of rhesus monkeys fearlessly sitting in the road. I dodge rockfalls and lean hard into turns, nearly scraping my toes. In sections the road shadows the Ganges; in others, the glacial river water flows hundreds of feet below, churning under cliffs. I grin constantly.

Breathe. Relax. Stay left.

Cars and trucks pass three abreast, blaring trumpetlike horns that echo off the mountains. Despite many reckless passes and near

'Remember, yoga is more about the mind than the body. And don't worry so much,' he says, 'Worry is praying for what you don't want'

named Madhay, via Facebook, Raised in an ashram himself, Madhay abandoned the austere path the day he arrived in Rishikesh. He claims that 'the power of the Ganges was so high, I couldn't depart.' Today, he does the logistical heavy lifting for large groups and helps with random requests from visitors like me. After I repeatedly emailed him asking the best way to get from A to B, he finally asked, gently, 'Peter, would a motorcycle work for you?'

When I meet Madhav, he is smiling next to my British-designed, Indian-built 500cc bike, a shimmering classic. I offer to pay for the rental of my motorised magic carpet in advance. Madhav gives a slight head wobble and responds, 'No problem, Peter. You pay later.' It's then I realise Madhav is one of those local people you never want to lose, even after you have returned home.

On my first outing, I explore the crumbling ashram where the Beatles lived. As I wander the ruins, I wonder where Lennon wrote 'Dear Prudence'. The lyrics 'won't you come out to play' are said to be a plea to friend Prudence Farrow, Mia's sister, to snap out of a reclusive state of meditation. I use Lennon's words to validate my motorcycle venture.

During sunsets, I enjoy the singing at *aarti* – the Hindu 'happy hour' - a daily ceremony on the banks of the Ganges. Scores of Indians and a sprinkling of curious travellers sing Hindu hymns and swirl lanterns to seal prayers before splashing Ganges water on their feet. Some offer prayers via candles that they float downstream in miniature boats made misses, no one shakes a fist or seems to shout a Hindi word of road rage. If they do, I miss it in translation. The flow of chaotic karma keeps moving up this road. Signs written in cursive letters offer yogilike reminders: 'License to Drive, Not to Fly.'

As the sun expands into an orange ball on the horizon, I arrive at Vashista cave, thought to be the oldest meditative cave in the region. Some call it the birthplace of conscious thought. It's also where I can catch a rowboat ferry across the Ganges to Anand Lok, a yoga and meditation retreat where I'll stay for two days. First, though, I have to find somewhere to park my motorcycle.

With dusk gathering, I notice a man cloaked in the saffron-coloured robes of a sadhu. I approach him and ask if he can help me with the bike. He opens his arms warmly and says, 'Leave bike with me.' In my mind, a red flag shoots skyward. While saffron robes generally signify a 'holy man' or one who has renounced the material world, rumours circulate that criminals use these same robes as a cover when in hiding. Flash decision time. I choose to stick with Madhav's nonworry approach.

'OK, I'll tip you nicely. Keep an eye on my baby.' My new Enfield minder smiles. I walk to the river and up the stone beach to the ferry.

Anand Lok overlooks the Ganges on the edge of Sirasu, a village with no roads. Only a pedestrian jula (bridge) and ferry service (except during the monsoon season) connect it to the modern world. Jagdish greets me on arrival with the warmest smile I've ever witnessed. For the next couple of days, I walk along the Ganges, drink chai to ward off the evening and morning chill, and play with schoolchildren in the village.





Throughout India, the poverty can be alarming, even overwhelming. Its bony hand reaches into every corner, including the village of Sirasu. However, the villagers offer testimony to the wealth of contentment in their world of little. They are poor in rupees yet seem rich in spirit.

I ask Jagdish if he does yoga.

'Yes, every day. Work is my yoga, My job keeps my body flowing,' Motivated to keep my yoga flowing, I do sun salutations on a sandy Ganges beach one morning. A village teenager decides to join me. As if on cue, this rippling, muscled teen closes his eyes and falls backward, folding into an arching backbend. Given our language rift, we end up communicating with yoga poses and laughter. After a while, I point to the river and say, 'Swim?' The boy answers with a head wobble - that ubiquitous Indian gesture that I loosely understand as 'very good'. Under crisp blue skies we strip down to boxers and dash into the icy waters of the Ganges. The blast of cold immediately steals my air and pierces me awake. Swimming in the Ganges is believed to be purifying not just physically but also symbolically, washing away all prior sins. I

'Hello?' I say hesitantly as I enter total darkness. Rookie move. Clearly not the best way to enter an ancient meditation cave. No one answers. I'd recrossed the Ganges to get back on the road. I also wanted to spend time in Vashista cave. Shuffling through cool, sweet air, across grain-sack flooring, I stop near candlelight, sit down cross-legged and try to relax. Eyes closed, I focus on my breathing. My mind quickly strays. Why am I here? Has the sadhu stolen my bike?

can't say if my sins have vanished, but I feel electrified.

Relax. Just a rental. Breathe.

I return the focus to my lungs. A mental rhythm aligns with my breath. I open my eyes. Suddenly, I see the entire cave. I'm alone at the end of a long tunnel-like passageway. Tokens of worship sit near candles on a stone altar. The air tastes even sweeter, fresher now.

Back outside, I glance at the time. My internal clock tells me I have meditated for maybe 10 minutes. My watch says it has been over 50. Where did I go?

Parked just as I'd left it, the shiny Enfield sits up the hill, unharmed. My bike keeper magically appears. 'See, no problem,' he says. 'Bike here. I'm sadhu. Money.' I happily hand over a wad of rupees – about R40 – to a man who is likely not a sadhu. He shuffles his saffron robe, quickly burying the notes in a fold, then says, 'More. Hungry.' I peel off a few more notes, which he gingerly takes before disappearing toward the river. I tally the parking cost: R60.

On first kick, my bike rumbles to life. Feeling almost drugged from my Vashista time warp, I cruise, meditating on the road.

Stay left. Stay left. Stay left.

Riding now by instinct, feeling what I can't help but call 'biker Zen', I swerve past cows, their calves, street vendors, sadhus, hippies and healers. I continue meditating, maintaining a laser awareness of my surroundings and my existence at this exact time in space. This precious present moment. I take one more quick side trip.

Hidden in the hills just north of Rishikesh. Ananda Spa – which originally was a palace of the maharaja of Tehri Garhwal - is considered one of the best in the world. The treacherous road to Ananda comes with warning signs: 'Sharpest Turns Ever', 'Road Is Hilly, Don't Be Silly' and 'After Whiskey, Driving Risky.'

When I roll past a security gate into the entrance area, with its manicured gardens, a helicopter pad and a man playing bagpipes (a throwback to colonial times), I garner a few looks. 'Does the valet take motorcycles?' I ask casually. 'Of course. We love Enfields,' the manager says. He adds, 'But you are the first to arrive by bike. Very unique.'

I spend a night at luxurious Ananda. I eat well (true to my new diet) and experience an ayurvedic treatment. Two men karatechop my back with herb-filled bags. At the end, my back is sore but looser. Somewhat reluctant to leave the luxe bubble, I motor downhill to the chaotic vitality that defines India. I arrive at the start of the evening aarti.

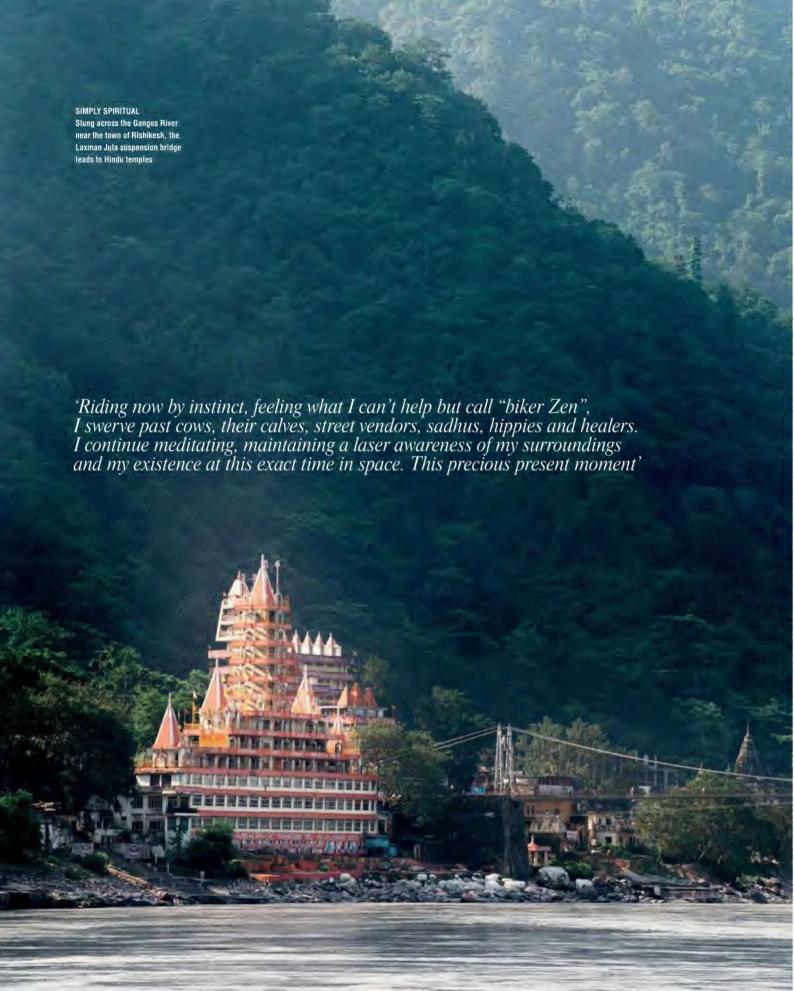
Later that night I find Madhav. He is helping organise a large international party. The schedule is tight and Madhav was hired to make sure everything clicks like clockwork - not easy in the Indian time zone. As I wait to chat with him, he is hounded with requests. Madhav answers each with grace and a friendly 'can do' yogi cool. As I watch Madhav go about his work, it occurs to me that this quiet, ever smiling man standing in front me - who has effortlessly guided me throughout my trip - is my symbolic charioteer (all right, motorcycle renter, travel adviser), helping me discover my inner om.

Sure, many of the lessons I'd experienced - stretch, breathe, eat slower and more healthily (less coffee, even), relax - are simple. And, yes, replacing the stresses of too much work and too much TV and computer screen time with crisp swims in sacred waters followed by time warps in caves and motorbike rides through Himalayan foothills could give most folks a greater peace of mind. Yet Madhav, I realise, is the walking example of that knowing soul I aspired to be. Nothing, no matter the urgency or size, derails him. He doesn't live in a cave, nor did he guide me through a single pretzel contortion. Yet he taught me, almost daily, not necessarily how to walk the 'yogi path' but how to understand it better and, most important, to realise that my mind needs as much stretching as my annoying back.

After two weeks of almost daily yoga, I can now touch my toes and even sit cross-legged through a meal. My back? The persistent pain hasn't entirely vanished. But it has subsided. Did my spine actually start to heal? I don't know, but neither I nor my inner om worry about it.

Parmarth Niketan Ashram From about R100 a night; www.parmarth.com Anand Lok Doubles from R640; www.anandlok.info Ananda Spa Doubles from R7 036; www.anandaspa.com

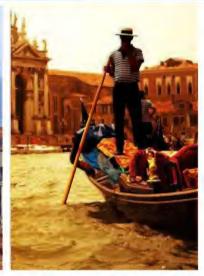
GETTING THERE By air Flights from Joburg to Delhi vary from R6 500 to R11 100 return, depending on when you travel. Shop around on www.kayak.com or www.travelstart.co.za, and check with Emirates, Etihad and SAA to compare flight times, as some have long stopovers. The nearest airport to Rishikesh is Dehradun (daily connections from Delhi). Several small airlines connect Delhi with Dehradun daily (it's a 55-minute flight, from R960 return), www.idiscoverindia.com. Connecting by train or bus Rishikesh doesn't have its own airstrip so access from Dehradun is usually via train (book in advance in peak seasons on www.book. mustseeindia.com) or bus. Regular services for both run from Haridwar, 24km away, and Dehradun, 45km away (40 minutes by road). Trains also connect regularly from Delhi (5h50), Varanasi, Lucknow, Mumbai and other long-distance cities.



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WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS AARON GEKOSKI

VIBRANT MADAGASCAR HAS FLITTED in and out of my thoughts for some time now. Perhaps I've watched too many TV documentaries or the kids' movie once too often. Either way, I suspect I don't fantasise alone. Since bolting from Africa 135 million years ago and later Asia, around 88 million years ago, Madagascar has been left to its own evolutionary devices. In its isolation, a cauldron of biodiversity has simmered, conjuring up such species as the giraffe-necked weevil, leaf-nosed snake, Parson's chameleon and Helmet Vanga. Like 80 percent of the animals found in Madagascar, these creatures exist nowhere else. While the pin-up species of Malagasy tourism, such as cutesy lemurs and colour-shifting chameleons, may grab the headlines, the animals that I was most interested in come out of the blue – the multicoloured fingers of Madagascar's coral reefs have long been beckoning.

A less well-known dive destination than neighbouring Mozambique, these waters rarely drop below 25 degrees and offer good year-round visibility. The opportunity exists to see dolphins, whales, sharks and manta rays, along with a wide array of macro life. In which case, why does Madagascar remain off our nautical radar? In order to answer this question, I was off to Madagascar.

The island of Nosy Be, meaning 'big island' in Malagasy, is the country's most popular tourist haunt. Located eight kilometres off its northwestern coast, this volcanic island is a springboard to Madagascar's best dive sites. Due to their proximity to Nosy Be, the best way of exploring these sites is by dive live-aboard. The normal schedule of a live-aboard goes something like this: wake, eat breakfast, dive, go fishing, dive, have siesta, eat fresh fish, dive, eat more delicious morsels, drink cocktails, sleep happily. They're shamelessly indulgent, but I love them.

I arrived with my girlfriend Gemma Catlin and documentary maker Chris Scarffe in tow, for two live-aboards, one north, the other south. Our first trip was to the Mitsio Archipelago, a series of silver basalt islands some 60 kilometres north of Nosy Be. Our vehicle, home and dive centre for the week was Gecko, an 11-metre catamaran owned and operated by the impeccable Harriet Joao of MadagasCat Charters and Travel. 'It's a raw experience, diving the Mitsios,' Jacques Viera, our dive guide and dive manager of Sakatia Lodge, explained. 'You'll hardly see any other divers or boats during the trip, so if you like empty seas yet still want to see big fish, we should have a good trip.'

Our first couple of days were spent diving the Four Brothers. Nesting seabirds including frigatebirds and gannets were the primary inhabitants of these grand islands. Here we were treated to large schools of game fish: toothy barracuda torpedoed past us, along with some sizeable (delicious looking) kingfish. The walls were dashed with large black coral trees, sea fans and whip coral. Tragically malproportioned puffer fish flapped their little fins in successful attempts to avoid my lens. And as hawksbill turtles nonchalantly chowed the unappetising-looking coral, emperor angelfish lit up the reef. So far, so good.

My favourite dive in the Mitsios, however, was at the shallow site, the childishly giggle-inducing Two Tits. This abstract painting of a dive site plied us with a veritable fishy feast in crystal-clear conditions. It reminded me of diving in Asia's pregnant waters, as a smorgasbord of tropical fish smeared neon trails over the reef.

Between dives we were treated to some serious humpback whale action, as a succession of mothers and calves breached in front of Gecko. When they concluded their show, I slipped into the water while a pod of around 40 bottlenose dolphins powered past, their movements so fluid, so majestic that they could have been generated by special effects experts.

The dive site Manta Reef lived up to its name, as a four-metre manta ray, with flaps of her giant wings, circled the cleaning station where obliging fish nibbled parasites off her. And then from beauty to the beast. At the site Seven Little Sharks, we bumped into a giant aesthetically challenged humphead parrotfish, which looked like the love child of a parrotfish and John Merrick, the Elephant Man. Finally, the nearby wreck at Mahavelana provided a much-needed breather from all of the animal action.

We departed Gecko with bodies sated, eyes gleaming. It was time for a week on land before our next live-aboard to the southerly Radames Islands. We made our way to Ambatoloaka village, the main tourist haunt in Nosy Be. Ambatoloaka consists of a dense strip of restaurants and bars, offering decent options for accommodation and dining. An idyllic, palm-fringed beach was peppered with traditional boats, dive vessels and luxury catamarans. While the ubiquitous tourist tat was peddled on the beach, refreshingly, sellers were always polite and never pushy. English is not spoken widely in Nosy Be, but a good deal of gesticulating and 's'il vous plaits' or 'non mercis' go a long way.

Our trip to Madagascar's most decorated destination for scuba junkies was with dive centre Oceane's Dream. But before this, manager Paul Bergonier, scuba's Gerard Depardieu, took us to dive at Tanikely Marine Reserve. Lying just a few kilometres' boat ride away, Nosy Tanikely is the most popular day trip out of Nosy Be and is lined with a beautiful beach (if you can block out the splattering of









The 'eighth continent' had surpassed my expectations. Madagascar is as magical and beguiling a place as you could wish to visit

silver-haired French men in tight Speedos). Well policed by diligent park rangers, marine life flourishes here, making it a great shallow dive and snorkelling site. Members of this giant marine ecosystem inhabited, ate and darted through a coral buffet of mushrooms, sausages and cauliflower, all served up on giant polyp plates.

Having had our fill of 'nice' diving, we prepared ourselves for our live-aboard on Lady Corsica, a 13-metre catamaran. Our dive guide for this trip was Donatien Aubey, an über-chilled and likeable French dude. Much like the Mitsios, The Radames is renowned for hardcore, deep diving. The cutesy marine life of Tanikely would be a distant dream. It is also home to the notorious Greg's Wall, perhaps Madagascar's best-known dive site. Devastatingly, a mask mix-up ensured my dive was spent in foggy ignorance. I saw what I believed to be our first lionfish of the trip, dramatically silhouetted among the giant fans. Though for all I knew it could have been Aslan himself. Chris and Gemma's assurances that the site was topographically breathtaking offered scant consolation.

Three Rocks was a wall dive similar to Greg's Wall, replete with sea fans. It supplied me with my favourite photo of the trip: a diver silhouetted among the skeletal fans. This image, to me, epitomised the deep diving in Madagascar, the feeling of isolation and insignificance among dramatic coral formations

Our evening was spent at Baramahamay, a small fishing village where traditional boats are produced. Baramahamay is also famous for its mangrove crabs - which, cooked in a rich curry sauce, didn't disappoint - and lemurs. The next morning we dived South Canyon. This contained a greater diversity of fish than any other site we'd seen in Madagascar: some big conked unicornfish, a lippy potato bass, sleek mobulas, shimmering scribbled filefish, stealthlike dog-tooth tuna, perma-surprised bigeve trevally, more unidentified groupers. muscular Spanish mackerel, thousands of charming garden eels, a bitey clown trigger fish. I think you get the idea.



Somehow, our day was to get even better: cue Nosy Iranja. Cue heaven. Connected by a two-kilometre spit, Nosy Iranja consists of two islands. One is privately owned, the other contains a boutique lodge, small village and some bungalows. Visitors can stay with the locals for around R90 a night; hotel rooms are rather pricier. After hiking to the island's lighthouse, we stopped to take in the magnificent views. Lying before us were multiple hues of green that sprouted out of the deep red earth. Layers of fluffy white cloud, cast over the shimmering turquoise waters, hung in a cobalt blue sky. I could have ditched my bag, speared fish for dinner and gone feral in the village of Nosy Iranja. Sadly our packed schedule meant a couple of hours had to suffice. Anyway, there was more diving to be done.

As we surfaced from our final dive and slipped our fins off, a pod of dolphins surrounded Lady Corsica. It must have been a school day: calves, barely two months old, propelled themselves out of the water and performed a few passable flips, before belly flopping back into the water. Their efforts offered a heart-warming finale to a packed and unique dive adventure.

As we sailed back to Nosy Be contentedly slurping Malagasy vanilla rum and coconut milk cocktails, we reflected upon our trip. The 'eighth continent' had surpassed my expectations. Madagascar is as magical and beguiling a place as you could wish to visit. Thankfully, it is still relatively untouched by tourism's marauding fingers. Those who brave the distance, and eye-watering airfares, will be welcomed by wonderfully hospitable people. The service everywhere is exceptional, the food varied and tasty. Madagascar is a breathtaking arena for its original cast of plant and animal life. After all, theatrical wildlife is nothing without the appropriate amphitheatre to parade its vivid scales and vibrant feathers.

Madagascar has long been known as either 'The Red Island' for its red laterite earth or 'The Green Island' for its plant life. Due to the richness of these waters, 'The Blue Island' would be just as fitting.

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JOIN THE TREEVOLUTION Greenpop's upbeat camp on the banks of the Zambezi River was the base for a three-week programme that saw the planting of 4 135 trees by a group of volunteers from South Africa, Zambia and around the entire planet

DIGGING IT

NOT JUST FOR TREE-HUGGERS: VOLUNTEERING TO TAKE PART IN GREENPOP'S REFORESTATION EXPEDITION TO ZAMBIA IS RIGOROUS, CHALLENGING AND ENTIRELY HEART-WARMING

WORDS ALEX DODD PHOTOGRAPHS WENDEL FERNANDES

IT ALL STARTED LAST CHRISTMAS with a gift from a good friend. In one sense it was a humble gift – no more that a simple piece of paper, really. But in another, it was a boarding pass – an open sesame to new worlds of possibility. It came in the form of a certificate stating that a tree had been planted on our behalf and giving the GPS coordinates of our tree, so that we could find it and follow its growth over the years. We could have just filed it away with a smile and a warm glow in our hearts. But when we visited the website listed and learned about Greenpop – a visionary urban greening and reforestation movement started up by a group of Cape Town hipsters with a big dream to start greening the planet, beginning right here and now – we wanted to be part of their 'treevolution'.

We began by getting our hands dirty at a tree-planting day at a school in Athlone, where we met two of Greenpop's originators, Misha Teasdale, whose home-grown star appeal could yet inspire a movie, and Lauren O'Donnell, who has a fresh-faced, can-do approach to dealing with the nitty-gritty of spades, compost, mulch and watering cans. After the success of their initial 'Day of 1 000 Trees' project in September 2011, which saw 500 volunteers plant indigenous and fruit trees around Manenberg, they decided to take on a bigger purpose with gusto and cofounded Greenpop together with their friend, Jeremy Hewitt.

'To make up for the world's loss of trees in the past decade, we need to plant about 14 billion trees every year for 10 years in a row,' says the United Nations Environment Programme. When we heard that Greenpop was planning an expedition to Zambia to plant thousands of trees in a country with one of the highest deforestation rates in the world, we booked our places before you could say 'Faidherbia albida'. This turned out to be the main species of tree we planted during a week of intense digging – in both senses of the word! Because, oh boy, did we dig and, oh boy, did we dig digging – not to mention the whole experience of getting to know one of the most breathtakingly beautiful areas in Africa with a group of like-minded volunteers of all ages from across the planet.

The laid-back spirit of the area starts to enter your pores from the very moment you disembark at Harry Mwanga Nkumbula International Airport, just outside Livingstone – a place that recalls Jamaica in its easy-going 'irie' approach to life. Time slows right down as the temperature warms up – a sure-fire recipe for good times...

We climbed aboard a touring truck with a group of strangers who would soon become *compadres* – it's amazing what shovelling dirt together can do to firm up a friendship. The Greenpop spirit of upbeat originality was immediately evident in the bright bunting adorning the inside of the wood-panelled vehicle that would be ferrying us along crazy-jiggy rural roads to farms and schools in the area. And when we disembarked at Makaranga Lodge we were welcomed into a camp that had been dreamily decorated with festive lanterns, African wax-print cloths and folksy wooden signs riffing on the tree-lovin' theme. This place – and a small but quite comfy two-person tent (foam mattresses and hooded sleeping bag make a world of difference) – was to be our home.

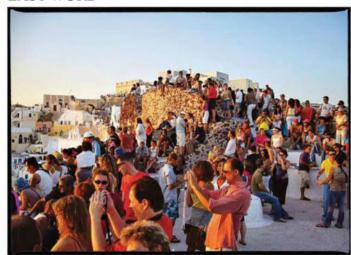
Our days started early with a bowl of tasty cinnamon and raisin porridge and off to the nursery to load up hundreds of dewy saplings onto the buses. We worked in teams, passing the young plants from one person to the next to form a tree-chain – a basic kind of fun and a hugely welcome antidote to numbing everyday online work.

There is a simple phrase that will echo in my head for years to come: 'That's right.' This lifting affirmation was uttered time and time again by Benjamin Mibenge, a man so humble you could miss the fact that he is that real thing – a living hero. Fit as a spring chicken in his seventh decade of life, this courageous environmental activist has planted more trees with his own bare hands than there are pages in the JRR Tolkien trilogy – and with as much pluck and wisdom as the Hobbit. 'That's right,' he'd say, to a 12-year-old boy plunging his spade into granite gravel. 'That's right,' he'd say as we filled up a watering can from a lone tap to lug it half kilometre to a newly planted fruit orchard. And slowly, surely, his words become a kind of shared mantra as we planted. We planted at a town school, a rural school, a communal farm – brilliantly called 'Sons of Thunder' – and a trail-blazing lion conservation project, Lion Encounters.

In the evening we'd return to our riverside base to iced Mosi beers (local nectar), hearty home-cooked meals and live jam sessions around the fire, complete with accordion and twangy mouth organ, courtesy of one-man folk band Jeremy Loops, who just happens to be another of Greenpop's cofounders.

The planting was rigorous, as the wintry earth was often dry and rocky, and had be broken up with picks. But the toughness of it was offset by the pleasure of working with our Zambian fellow volunteers, who ranged between the ages of six and sixty-something and showed such passion for the project and dedication to take care of the trees once we'd all headed home, that – well, there's no plainer way to say – it expanded our hearts. Over the course of three weeks, 4 135 trees were planted in Zambia. 'That's right!'

Trees for Zambia was the start of an ongoing campaign to make Zambia a greener, more sustainable place. To volunteer in 2013 or learn more about Greenpop, visit www.greenpop.org



MASS AND CRASS Crowds of tourists watch as the sun sets on Santorini

I am on the balcony of the Grande Bretagne, one of Athens's most famous hotels, a tribute to old European grandeur in the shadow of the Acropolis, where democracy was born more than 2 000 years ago. From my perch above Constitution Square, I can see today's democracy in action - demonstrators chant slogans and wave fists against the government they hold responsible for leading them into a fiscal firestorm. But Greeks also know what the panic-prone, 24-hour news cycle has overlooked: this ancient land has weathered worse storms, from Persian and Roman armies to Ottoman occupation and military junta. As my father often said to me, 'We Greeks thrive on chaos.' So while Greeks remain deeply shaken about the current crisis, they have a more sanguine long-term outlook.

Which is why I am on my way to Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest

city. Word has reached me of a cultural renaissance.

During the past few decades, Greece barrelled down the road of mass, and most definitely crass, tourism. More than 16 million international tourists visited the country in 2011, over a million more than in the previous year. That should be great news for a country that relies on tourism for economic growth. Yet the economic benefits from those holidaymakers are spiralling down, by some estimates dropping 10 to 15 percent last year. Today, a tourist in Greece spends an average of about R830 a day - including lodging, meals and activities. This so-called vacation bargain carries a big price tag in terms of damage to the culture and the environment. Busloads clog fragile archaeological sites; packed-to-the-gills charter flights dump partying loads onto tiny islands; and overflowing cruise crowds spill into historic ports. The result: once idyllic fishing hamlets and villages have been transformed into emporiums of cheap trinket shops and look-alike concrete hotels.

Don't get me wrong. I am not foolish enough to think that a place should never change. But when that change is for the worse ('nothing is real here anymore,' one native of tourist-laden Santorini lamented), it's time to reboot the system, lest tourism to this sun-drenched land conquer the country in a way that even centuries of invading empires failed to do. Enter Thessaloniki.

'There is nothing wrong with being a country of feta and olives!' insists Yiannis Boutaris, the gold-earringed, tattooed mayor. 'These agricultural products are our heritage, not our problem. We want to be who we are. That's why Starbucks and McDonald's have had little success in this city. I want Thessaloniki to be a model for sustainable

OUT OF THE CHAOS

In a backlash against low-budget, high-volume tourism, there is the promise of a new Grecian formula

WORDS COSTAS CHRIST

tourism in Greece,' Boutaris tells me. He is reacting to what an Athens official told me about the economic crisis: there is a fear that Greece will slide back into being a country of feta and olives. To Boutaris, that would be an improvement.

The 70-year-old former winemaker is promoting tourism that supports authenticity rather than trampling it. Jazz clubs blending Eastern and Western music are springing up in abandoned buildings. Chefs are forging more partnerships with local farmers and cooking up what many Greeks now agree is the best cuisine in the country (I concur, having had one of the finest meals I have ever eaten at the Epta Thalasses restaurant). And a potpourri of vibrant street cafés, outdoor markets and art galleries tucked amid the city's ancient ruins and modern architecture is bringing out the best of both. The creative energy is palpable.

Thessaloniki is the epicentre of this movement, but from Athens to Crete, a new course is being charted for one of the Mediterranean's most popular travel destinations. 'Greece was bent on gaining mass tourism and losing its soul. Now Greeks are heading back to their roots and talking about a sustainable future that embraces nature and culture,' says Nikki Rose, founder of Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries, a company that organises tours in partnership with village artisans.

In Athens, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation is breaking ground on a 'cultural Noah's ark' - a centre (partially powered by solar energy) that will house the National Library and the Greek National Opera. In Thira on the island of Santorini, there is a visionary mayor, Anastasios Nikolaos Zorzos. 'We want to change tourism for the better, rather than have tourism keep changing us,' he tells me.

The Association of Greek Tourism Enterprises (SETE) has issued a report on the future of tourism in Greece, stating it is time to 'rethink our mistakes and seek a new approach'. Still, many Greeks fear hitting a brick wall when it comes to the national government, which has largely promoted dependency on low-budget, high-volume tourism. 'The people are convinced, and now we hope the government will understand, that the tourism model we have followed for the last 30 years is no longer relevant to our future,' says Georgios Drakopoulos, SETE's director general.

Is the country that gave democracy to the world, along with epic poems, great advances in science - and, ves, the word 'chaos' - about to embark on a new golden age of Greek tourism? If only the oracle at Delphi were still around to tell us.



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